

# Gordon Craigie

Robbie relaxing into the next stage of his retirement...



EAGLE-EYED *iScot* readers may have noticed that there was no *Dinwoodie Interview* in last month's issue. Instead, Robbie's family tale of *Fisherfolk* filled the slot but, in a classic "poacher turned gamekeeper" twist, my first interviewee for this column is... Robbie Dinwoodie!

He is one of the most prominent Scottish journalists of his generation, and Robbie will no doubt be tickled by my use of the word "is" there as he now claims to have fully retired... we'll see! His "first" retirement came in 2016 when he left *The Herald* after 27 years during which time he contributed variously as reporter, feature writer, diary columnist, columnist, political correspondent and chief leader writer. This period followed on directly from his 15 years at *The Scotsman* where, in addition to his reporting, and feature and leader writing duties he also contributed book and theatre reviews. His CV is therefore both comprehensive and impressive, all the more so when you consider the magnitude of many of the stories he was responsible for bringing to national attention.

As a young boy growing up in Edinburgh, Robbie was not blessed with good health. He suffered badly from asthma and eczema and had constant ear infections from the associated rhinitis. In his own words, "I was a sickly kid and saw a lot of doctors. I thought doctors were the good guys, so I was going to be a doctor when I was at primary school." Medicine's loss was to be journalism's gain, however, when that youthful ambition changed overnight as a result of a Wardie Primary School excursion to see how a newspaper was put together.

"We went on an outing to see the old *Daily Mail* building down at Tanfield House in Canonmills. At that time the paper still came out as the *Scottish Daily Mail*, a broadsheet, so we're talking about the mid-sixties, I'd be about 10, and I was just hooked, it was fantastic. We saw the newsroom clattering away with the big typewriters, and they took us down to the caseroom where we watched pages being made up and the print room where the typesetters worked. We queued up and gave the typesetter our name and he clanked that into the old linotype machine, then a slug of hot lead dropped out at the other end which we got to take away home. If you had a wee printing set then you had your own name that you could stamp in the ink – all that sort of stuff changed my outlook and I just thought, 'no, I'm going to be a reporter, this is what I'm going to do'. So, I knew when I was literally 10 years old what I wanted to do!





## An independent mind...

"At secondary school, Trinity Academy, all the subjects that I chose were single-mindedly in pursuit of a career in journalism. In my final year, I decided to focus on Norman MacCaig for my Sixth Year Studies English dissertation, while everyone else was doing Kafka or Camus. I just sidled up to Norman during an event at the Edinburgh Festival and asked if I could interview him. He was an ex-teacher himself, a lovely man, and he had me round to his flat in Bruntsfield and gave me as much time as I needed to interview him, and that formed a big part of my dissertation. With hindsight, even that was quite journalistic."

By 1973, just as Robbie was leaving school, it was clear that the newspaper industry was contracting, particularly in Scotland. Yet, undeterred, the young Dinwoodie pressed on with his ambitions and, just like on that visit to Tanfield House almost 10 years previously, fate was to intervene in the most unexpected way.

"I had an application in to do English at Edinburgh University, and a more serious application in to do Journalism at the College of Commerce, now Napier University. But I had also applied for the weekly newspaper group, Scottish & Universal Newspapers (SUN), which owned the *Glasgow Herald*. While I was doing my interview tests for that in Glasgow, somebody asked if I'd gone for the *Edinburgh Evening News* job – I said, 'what *Evening News* job, I didn't know there was one'. When I got back to Waverley on the train I went straight up the stairs to North Bridge, went in and rapped on the counter and asked if anyone from Personnel was there. Someone came down and said, 'Sorry, you've missed the *Evening News* job, that's already been allocated, but we're about to advertise a traineeship for *The Scotsman*'. I filled in the application form standing at the counter and, at the end of the form, it said, 'give us a 500-word essay on why you want to be a journalist'. Now, in my inside pocket, not a word of exaggeration, I had a carbon copy of the one that I'd written in support of my application to the SUN group in Glasgow! So, I stapled that onto the application form,




Young Robbie with, clockwise, big brother John, mum Nan, dad Robert (wearing cap) and Uncle Jock (right)



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handed it back over and, after a couple of weeks had passed, I got an invitation to go into *The Scotsman*. I was taken through to see the Editor, Eric Mackay, and it was only halfway through chatting to him that I realised I was in – I'd got the job! The SUN interview had involved around 12 of us sitting in a room completing a range of tests and exercises, but this... I was just in! Pure, amazing luck."



On TV, discussing Northern Ireland

After completing a training scheme in Newcastle with around 15 other teenagers – “We had a wild 5 months. It was like a 5-month Fresher’s Week!” – Robbie returned to Edinburgh with his signed set of indentures. For the next two-and-a-half years he was moved between the various departments as he really began to learn his trade. “I did a bit of subbing, which was very good for me because you began to see what it’s like to be a sub-editor and have to handle terrible copy! It actually makes you very conscientious as a writer to try and give the sub as little hassle as possible and try and make sure your copy is clean. Some of the most experienced people at *The Scotsman* at that time had dreadful copy, it was quite shocking, a real eye-opener for a kid! I did a spell in features, a few football matches and theatre reviews, and it was brilliant – I was on *The Scotsman*, a young lad straight out of school into *The Scotsman*. It was remarkable, I was by far the youngest person on the editorial staff, and I was raw, but they must’ve spotted something. There was an oil rig disaster in the Norwegian sector of the North Sea in 1980. The Alexander Kielland rig collapsed, and 123 men died. I was sent over to do the first-hand reportage, and I think that raised a few eyebrows because I was still only in my mid-twenties, very young. But they’d decided that I had a flair for going places, arriving with a fresh pair of eyes and reporting back in a certain way. What I would tend to do was make the reporting reasonably colourful, not opinionated but colourful, because there’s no point in a newspaper sending you just to provide bland copy.”

As our chat continued, and I began to get lost in Robbie’s anecdotes, it became obvious that the most difficult part of writing this feature was going to be what to leave out, not what to include! When someone has covered, with such distinction, most of the major national and international social and political stories of the last 40 years, real heavyweight stuff, how do you decide? In his mainstream media

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career, Robbie is probably most famous for outstanding reportage from Northern Ireland, insider reporting from the Miner’s Strike, critical analysis of the Falklands War and his political coverage in the period leading up to the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament right through to the first independence referendum.

But one story from 1981 also deserves special mention. “When Toxteth in Liverpool went up in flames, *The Scotsman* didn’t pay too much attention to it, but I felt this was a big significant story. It was all about a certain point in Thatcherism. It was about urban discontent, about young people, and about police behaviour, and these things were important. They knew they’d made a mistake in not sending us. A week or two later I covered the Moss Side riots in Manchester, and it was fascinating because James Anderton, the then Chief Constable for Greater Manchester, was obviously copying a lot of the tactics that I knew the RUC were using in Belfast, like the aggressive use of armoured Land Rovers and minibuses, and hemming folk in what became known as ‘kettling’. This wasn’t a race riot, because there were black and white people together, it was an anti-police riot as much as anything and therefore an anti-establishment riot by people who felt forgotten.

“At one point I was phoning copy from an old-fashioned red phone booth to a copytaker – no mobile phones in those days, just a pocketful of 10p pieces! Copytakers were brilliant, and they were not to be seen just as people who took down dictation, because they were better than that. They were so experienced that, if you were winging it, they would remind you that you’d just used a similar phrase in a previous paragraph, catch repetitions, check spellings, they were superb and really nice people. The newspapers did away with them as soon as they could give reporters laptops, which was the loss of another line of defence against bad writing. Anyway, while I was phoning stuff in from the middle of this riot the riot lines had moved a block, which meant the phone box was now in the middle! I had the police on one side with horses and armoured minivans and all that, and I had the rioters on the other and there’s petrol bombs being thrown and stones and bricks and all the rest of it and I actually said to the copytaker, ‘I think I’d better go now because things are getting a bit tricky outside!’ I thought, ‘what do I do now, I’ve got a choice, which way do I go?’ I decided if I went back towards the police then they’d just turn me back, so I turned and went straight towards the rioters, and it was fine.

“But I’m probably proudest of my Northern Ireland stuff. In May 1981 I was told, ‘get yourself to Belfast as fast as you can because Bobby Sands is about to die!’ He was nearing the end of his hunger strike. The quickest way was to get a train then taxi to Glasgow Airport, stay at the airport hotel for a few hours’ sleep then get the first flight in the