

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

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

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

A fitting tribute to Norman MacCaig



Just a few of Robbie's many front pages on Northern Ireland

morning, I think about six o'clock. My radio alarm went off around five and heard the news that Sands had died at one-fifteen that morning. I'd never set foot in Ireland before, far less in Northern Ireland in the Troubles, so it was all fresh to me. It was all the shock of the new, I wasn't jaded, arriving at the airport straight into heavily armed police and soldiers, roadblocks, searches, all that. I think my coverage had a certain innocence to it. If it was fresh to me I could make it fresh to the reader.

"One good example was when a contact helped me get into the home of one of the *Gibraltar Three* on the night before his funeral. The *Gibraltar Three* were members of a provisional IRA cell who were in Gibraltar on active service when the SAS ambushed them and shot them dead. It was interesting because it looked just like one of these Scottish peripheral housing estates. Belfast is very like that, it's got a bit of England in it in that a lot of the inner-city housing is like old red-brick *Coronation Street* style, but it's also got the Scottish peripheral thing of modern council housing estates around the edge of town. And, if you step into these, you look around and you could be back in Edinburgh or Glasgow, it just looks like the same architecture. So I go in and, obviously, it was the Catholic way, you know, the body was on display and the old aunties and relatives make up sandwiches and cups of tea in the kitchen and pass them out, and then you queued to walk round the front parlour to see the body laid out in the coffin. But at either end of the coffin is a guy in a black balaclava, dressed all in black, holding his gun – an IRA guard of honour. The rest of it was just so familiar you know, the sympathy cards on the mantelpiece, the aunties making up sandwiches and dishing out the tea – all of this could have been a 16-year-old guy who died on his motorbike in Glasgow or Edinburgh, and then you suddenly have two armed men around this coffin. These are the little things that struck me because they told a story I wanted to tell, which was that these people are very like us, do not think for a minute they will be different from us. Their circumstances are different, and modern history has pushed them into an extreme place, but they are very much like you or me. I always felt that there was a kind of otherness about the Fleet Street coverage. The London-based journalists just looked at these people as alien and reported it that way – I didn't want to do that. What I wanted to report back to Scotland was that these were people very like us, and I hope that had some impact.

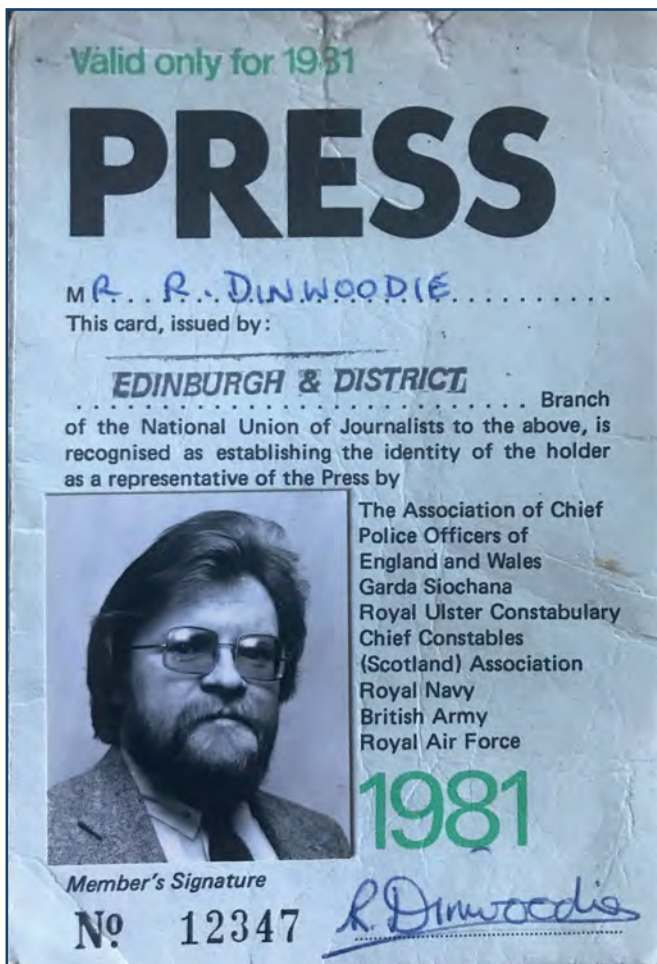
"The next day, at the funeral in Milltown Cemetery in Belfast, a UDA gunman, Michael Stone, climbed into the cemetery and began shooting and throwing grenades at the people gathered, me included! It was chaos, you were literally throwing yourself behind tombstones to avoid bullets and shrapnel. That was scary, but I never really

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felt in any danger in these situations. I did get some good advice from an experienced journalist when I was wearing a very old trench coat while covering a story where there was a sniper in some flats in downtown Belfast. He said, 'Robbie, that coat's not a good idea, because you stand out. You don't want to be highly visible like that', and I went, 'oh, right, I never thought about that!'

"In 1982 I was sent to London as a defence correspondent to cover the Falklands War. The last thing Eric Mackay said to me was, 'right Robbie, remember that, at times like these, the Ministry of Defence becomes the Ministry of Propaganda so be sceptical!' By that time I didn't really need to be told that, but it was still very reassuring to hear my editor say that because he was telling me that's how to handle this. With the Miners' Strike. Eric called me in and said, 'now look, the Coal Board are going to set the agenda, we know that. They will not have daily briefings, they'll make all sorts of claims, I want the other side of it. I want you to go into the mining communities and get me their stories and we'll get the Coal Board to respond to them to give balance'. It was brilliant, and the Coal Board absolutely hated that. Effectively, *The Scotsman* was embedding a reporter with the enemy, as far as they saw it."

In 1989 Robbie made the move from *The Scotsman* to the, then, *Glasgow Herald* though, as he was based in their Edinburgh office, not that much changed. He continued his specialist work in Northern Ireland alongside his other activities but in 1994 he moved into the political arena as *The Herald's*



This press card survived Robbie's adventures in Manchester and Belfast in 1981!

Scottish political correspondent. "My first big story was to interview Nicky Fairbairn, the Conservative MP. He'd already announced he wasn't standing again as an MP, because of ill-health, but he called his successor candidate for all the names. He called him an unelectable party clone – this was a guy called John Godfrey, a merchant banker from London with no real connections to Scotland and certainly no connections to the Perth and Kinross seat. This made a huge splash – outgoing Nicky Fairbairn calls planned successor an unelectable party clone! It was a hoot. I then covered that by-election in 1995, where Roseanna Cunningham won, and that was me into Scottish politics from that point. I covered the 1997 Devolution Referendum – Labour having previously sabotaged the 1979 one with the 40% rule! – and then the parliament came along and I had a whale of a time!"

Robbie completed his stint as *The Herald's* Scottish political correspondent on the exact same day as Alex Salmond stepped down as First Minister in November 2014. Having suffered a couple of health scares he'd decided to scale back his journalistic activities and step

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back from the front line. For the next two years he would continue to contribute columns and leaders to *The Herald* but, in typical fashion, he still had a scoop to deliver before, literally, tipping the contents of his Holyrood desk into a bin bag and heading into semi-retirement. "Alex had long promised me a valedictory interview, but it didn't happen until well into that evening. The big stories from the interview were that he wanted to change the rules to bring in fresh talent as candidates for the next election and that he reckoned the Yes campaign had peaked a week early in September – if they'd peaked a week later it wouldn't have allowed time for the fightback, 'The Vow' and all that sort of stuff. It's a theory, I'm not saying I believe it, but they were good quotes from Alex Salmond saying that. *The Herald* wanted a page lead on one story and a front-page splash on the other – this was half-eight at night, I phoned my wife and said, 'I think they're trying to kill me on my last day!' But I just reflect on the sheer pleasure of having been in on a bit of history in terms of the referendum, the devolved parliaments, and to have been there when Winnie Ewing said, 'the parliament of Scotland is hereby reconvened', you know? It really has been a front row seat."

It's quite poignant then that one of Robbie's final *iScot* interviews was with the very same Alex Salmond, in Issue 72, just before the Holyrood elections in May. Very different circumstances, obviously, with Alex now the leader of the Alba Party after all the accusations and recriminations of the last few years. "I've interviewed a few people from the so-called 'anti-Nicola camp', but to this day I still don't know what to think about the Salmond trial. I do think the fact that a jury listened to the evidence and cleared him of everything, I think the fact that Sam Barber, a very respected businesswoman, gave evidence saying that the main accuser, the one who accused of attempted rape, wasn't there that night, that makes me think there's something here, there's something conspiratorial about the nature of these allegations. At the same time, I find myself very reluctant to go down the road of believing that Nicola Sturgeon has orchestrated an attempt to put her former mentor in jail for the rest of his life, I just can't get my head around that. I've always got on well professionally with Salmond and we've got a lot of background in common, a lot of touching points, near things. We could've been classmates at the College of Commerce to do Journalism – as it turned out, I got *The Scotsman* job offer and he decided to go to St Andrews instead. We're both Hearts supporters, we're a similar age, 3 months between us age-wise, all sorts of points of contact. But I've never been friendly with him because that's what I've done with my journalistic career. Political journalism... I want to be on good terms, and I want to be fair, I don't necessarily want to be their friend. I know there's a type of journalist who operates through hosting dinner parties and cocktail parties and having politicians there, and I just think, 'no'. If you happen to be an old friend of somebody who becomes a politician then they're your friend, but as a journalist I wanted to keep my distance."

"I've loved writing for *iScot*, it's been great. I think I have two favourite interviews of all the ones I've done for *iScot*, one because it was a great coup, as it turned out. I interviewed Harry Benson, the famous Glasgow-born photographer who lives in New York, when there was a retrospective of his work as an exhibition at the Scottish Parliament to coincide with a film coming out about his life – it was my first online interview. Not only was it an interesting interview, and interesting to me as a journalist speaking to this veteran photojournalist, he gave *iScot* carte blanche to use any of his old photos we wanted, and Ken McDonald, the Editor, filled his boots! Over several pages we had some of these great iconic photographs that I was able to persuade Harry to give us free use of. I

don't know what that would've cost if an established, big-circulation magazine like *Time* or something had asked – the going rate would be astronomical!

"But my favourite *iScot* interview was with George Reid. The thing about George is that he's had about five careers and he's got anecdotes from all of them! His early time, his university time, was fascinating, how he got into journalism was amazing, and stories from his days in journalism were just fantastic. Then it was onto his broadcasting career, where he used to co-present the main news magazine programme for the north of England with Michael Parkinson. After that came his early Westminster career, in 1974, then he went off to Geneva to become Head of the International Red Cross and he had a trove of stories from going around disaster zones all round the world. Then he came back and became an MSP and Presiding Officer. And, when I was speaking to him, he was back teaching at Stirling University and was involved in a strike! He'd just had so many different careers and from all of them had these most magnificent memories and I thought, well, that's a life well lived and that was a story worth telling.

"You know, that's something I like, a good back story. Take my own case, you know, the sickly kid who wanted to become a journalist, and who disappointed his family because they all worked at sea. My brother went to sea, my father and uncles were all seafarers, and I never wanted to do that. Although my father didn't approve of me – I was never as close to him as my brother was, he was considerably older – I was gratified to hear that once my name began appearing in *The Scotsman*, maybe a copy of *The Scotsman* would be lying around in the Old Chain Pier bar in Newhaven, where my dad would go for a pint, he apparently became a pub bore – 'that's ma laddie, that's ma laddie!'. Another funny memory is that, after a few early bylines as Robbie, when I was going to get my first front-page splash I noticed that they were going to change my name to Robert. I said, 'hang on, why Robert?' 'Well, we just thought maybe that's more proper'. I said, 'no, my dad's Robert, I'm Robbie, I've always been Robbie to differentiate myself from my dad, I'm Robbie'. So they changed it. Unfortunately, as soon as they changed it, Richard Nixon resigned and my splash got bumped! So, my story that should have been my first front-page lead ended up being across the bottom of the page because of Richard Nixon's resignation – I never forgave Nixon for that!

"But for my piece last month on the *Fisherfolk*, Ken talked me into doing that because autobiographical stuff has never been my style. I've been a reporter, observing others and I've never been that easy about being the story, but he was really keen to use that front-page image so I said I'd try and find a way that I can do it and by focusing mainly on the history of Helen Adamson and the Newhaven fisherfolk history, working my way into it at the end a wee bit. I felt honour was satisfied, and I've got a lot of relatives expressing interest, so I'm pretty chuffed with it, a nice farewell."

Now that Robbie has unveiled his artistic talents to the world, is there more of that in the pipeline as part of this latest 'retirement'? "Lockdown has had an odd effect on my painting – you would think that spells in virtual isolation would provide an ideal opportunity to spend more time with the brushes, but it hasn't worked out that way! The whole thing has been strangely demotivating. Although I now have five paintings hanging at home, I haven't completed one for a year. I'm hoping that once classes resume I'll get back into it and gradually find my own style with a bit of help from my tutor. I can't just paint Newhaven fisherfolk!"

"Our other priorities are spending time with our grandchildren – we have four boys in Aberdeen and a boy and a girl in Edinburgh – and getting back to travelling



Robbie's first painting appeared on the *iScot* 74 front cover last month

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again as the Covid crisis eases. We love hiking in Austria, but we have now missed that for two years. So if 2021 has been the year of short staycations in Scotland, we're hoping 2022 will be our year of resumed globetrotting. And, of course, my writing will continue, just not to the same monthly schedule. I've been researching my Uncle Jock's war record serving on the Russian Arctic Convoys, so there will be a piece on that in due course as well as plenty of other pieces over time. I don't think *iScot's* seen the last of me..."

That's certainly good to hear, and Robbie moves into his next level of semi-retirement with heartfelt thanks and best wishes from the entire *iScot Magazine* team. Like Robbie, I consider myself to be 'o independent mind' and, again, eagle-eyed readers would've spotted that this new column is indeed titled *An independent mind...* I'm fully aware of the big shoes I'm filling, and I'm excited to be entrusted with carrying on from where Robbie left off. See you next month!