Notes on Dorothy Dunnett’s Lymond & Niccoló series (SL April 2020)

These notes provide an overview of the novels but without revealing some key twists in events and relationships, i.e. they are meant to be teasers rather than spoilers.

I have used material from the Kindle editions and some bits from Wikipedia. There are many relevant sites worth investigating (perhaps too many). A number of these use material from the same sources, including from Dorothy Dunnett’s own recaps in the books.

Reading list: (available on Kindle, or wherever in hardcopy. Maps easier to read in hard copy).

. The Lymond Chronicles

1. *The Game of Kings* (1961)
2. *Queen's Play* (1964)
3. *The Disorderly Knights* (1966)
4. *Pawn in Frankincense* (1969)
5. *The Ringed Castle* (1971)
6. *Checkmate* (1975)

House of Niccoló

1. *Niccolò Rising* (1986)
2. *Spring of the Ram* (1987)
3. *Race of Scorpions* (1989)
4. *Scales of Gold* (1991)
5. *The Unicorn Hunt* (1993)
6. *To Lie with Lions* (1995)
7. *Caprice and Rondo* (1997)
8. *Gemini* (2000)

Context: See Barbara Tuchman’s [*A Distant Mirror: the Calamitous 14th Century*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Distant_Mirror).

*The Dorothy Dunnett Companion* by Elspeth Morrison helps to untangle the many characters, in particular the fictional vs. the non-fictional. [multiple commercial links to publishers; I can’t find a generic link e.g. on Wikipedia]

There are some limited academic studies of her work:

Lisa Hopkins, '[Dorothy Dunnett's Lymond and Niccoló series: history versus experience](https://www.academia.edu/9408646/_Dorothy_Dunnett_s_Lymond_and_Niccol%C3%B2_series_historys_versus_experience_)';

Cleo McNelly Kearns, '[Dubious pleasures: Dorothy Dunnett and the historical novel](https://www.academia.edu/3710936/Dubious_pleasures_Dorothy_Dunnett_and_the_historical_novel)', Critical Quarterly, vol. 32, no. 1;

Deirdre Serjeantson, '[That Private Labyrinth: the books that made Lymond](https://www.academia.edu/30197812/That_Private_Labyrinth_The_Books_that_made_Dorothy_Dunnetts_Lymond)'.

The author

Dorothy Dunnett, OBE, born in Dunfermline, 1923-2001. Dunnett is best known for The House of Niccoló and The Lymond Chronicles, set in the 15th and 16th centuries, respectively, but written in reverse chronological order. Her other major work was King Hereafter, the 11th-century story of Earl Thorfinn the Mighty of Orkney, who Dunnett believed was the historical King Macbeth. She also wrote the [Johnson Johnson series of mystery novels and published her own version of the poetry of the Lymond series, among other works.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johnson_Johnson)

In addition, Dorothy Dunnett was a professional portrait painter and sculptress, as well as being involved in many aspects of Scottish public life and business, often alongside her husband, Sir Alastair Dunnett (editor of The Scotsman, 1956-72).

For more information, see <http://www.dorothydunnett.co.uk/>.

See also see The Guardian’s obituary by Magnus Linklater, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2001/nov/15/guardianobituaries.books

She has a memorial stone alongside those for [Robert Louis Stevenson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Louis_Stevenson), [Robert Burns](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Burns) and [Sir Walter Scott](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sir_Walter_Scott) in the [Makars' Court](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Makars%27_Court) in [Lady Stair's Close](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lady_Stair%27s_Close) on the [Royal Mile](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_Mile) in Edinburgh. There have been a number of gatherings of her readers in various locations covered by the books (Istanbul, Venice, Timbuktu...).

Intro

Dunnett’s Niccoló and Lymond series comprise 14 historical novels of the 15th and 16th centuries. Lymond was written first but chronologically it is preceded, with a gap, by the Niccoló series. There is a linkage but these relationships are not usually explicit. The books have a chronological development, but they can be read separately as the relevant history is usually elaborated in each novel. Each book is quite long – 600-800 pages – and each could have just as easily been released as more than one book.

The books take place in Europe, the Middle East and, to a degree, West Africa, bringing together concurrent events across the regions.

They contain many major and minor historical characters as well as fictional characters.

Some of the more important and seemingly incredible events and characters are factual.

As noted by biographer Elspeth Morrison, the novels are “full of allusions – to classical and Renaissance prose writing, to poetry, to songs, to liturgy, to folk verse and ballads and plays, to proverbs and jokes, some of them not entirely delicate.” These often appear in the original language – Latin, early French and Italian, Scots and smatterings of Gaelic, Arabic and even Icelandic!

The story lines are complex, in part because of the historical and international cross-linkages, but there is some recapitulation to make them relatively easy to follow. The principal characters are complex and are essentially revealed through their actions and speech.

Each series has a big secret that is only revealed at the end of the respective series – another reason to read the books in each series in chronological order.

The author gets you involved in the stories, which often recount momentous events, sieges, fight scenes (canon, hackbuts, arquebuses, bows and arrows, swords, fisticuffs and one fatal wrestling bout) and episodes of high-spirited and dangerous humour.

The writing style owes much to Scott and the 19th-century English novelists – descriptive passages to tide away the hours without TV.

These notes cover only the main threads of the stories and the main characters and try not to give too much away.

Principal characters

Dunnett’s principal characters are highly intelligent, complex, and, broadly speaking, good guys – but not always well-behaved or likeable. The reader is often unsure which side of the character is in operation at any particular time in the development of the stories. They are schemers. Dunnett does not take the reader inside the heads of the main characters (psychobabble); one has to deduce their thinking as revealed by their speech and actions, and interaction with others. There is nothing in the way of “aha, thought Claes, this is how to put one over on Simon….”

Claes van der Poele, later Nicolas (sometimes Nicol in Scotland) de Fleury, is the lead character in the House of Niccoló series. The (illegitimate?) son of a Scottish nobleman, Simon de St Pol, and grandson of Jordan de St Pol, Vicomte de Riberac, who both disown(/resent?) him and make his life a misery where they can. He is something of a hell-raiser and prankster who, as a young man, frequently finishes up in jail and is regularly beaten as a punishment. He has tristes with most girls in service in the wealthy merchant houses of Bruges and is sought for his prowess in this department, including by the royal Katelina van Borselen. When she finds she is pregnant, she marries Simon to give legitimacy to her thoroughly nasty son, fathered by the unaware Nicolas. Katelina, reconciled to Nicolas, dies in the siege at Famagusta.

Nicolas’ friends in Bruges include Felix (son of Marian de Charrety, owner of the dye-shop and brokig business, and who is later married to Nicolas), the notaries Julius and Gregory, Doctor Tobias (Tobie) and the soldier, Astorre, and all, except Felix who is killed in Italy, remain key characters through much of the series. We meet also the Guinea slave, Lopez (also Loppe, and, later, Umar), whose importance only becomes clear in Timbuktu.

Nicolas is rather clever. He has (almost) total recall and is also a mathematician, a talent that leads eventually to a highly successful business career in banking and shipping. He is also musical, although this only becomes evident later in the series, when he helps develop and produce a major choral work for presentation to the court at Holyrood.

Nicolas has the idea of developing Marian’s business into a courier (and intelligence) service to Italy, where he meets the de Medicis and is drawn into banking, eventually setting up his own bank, the House of Niccoló, in Venice. Security for the courier business develops into a mercenary company, captained by Astorre, as part of the de Charetty business, and Nicolas sees action in Italy, and later in Cyprus and Trebizond. He is engaged by the Medici to help defend Trebizond, where they have business. There develops a long-running fight with the Vatachino Bank, whose owners are a mystery till near the end of the series.

Nicolas moves to Scotland to build up a business there, and gets drawn into close contact with the royal Stewarts, with all sorts of lively, dangerous sports. (This is also a feature of the Lymond series.) To try to corner the market for salt cod he makes a trip to Iceland, where there is hunting with a gyrfalcon and a massive, deadly volcanic eruption which the ships barely escape. He develops a scheme that practically bankrupts the country, forcing him to quit his business and head off to Eastern Europe, where he more or less redeems himself and returns to Scotland, and final confrontations.

Nicolas is hard to analyse. He is seemingly boisterous, fun-filled, and most people like him, at least in the earlier books. But he has a dark side, storing up grievances for an eventual settling of scores, through carefully plotted manipulation.

Francis Crawford of Lymond is a Scot from just north of the Borders. He is introduced as the second son of the deceased Baron Culter, whose title passes to the elder son, Richard. Thanks to his mother, Sybilla, Francis is very well read and musically talented. (At one stage he says that he considers himself to be a musician.) However, he is also a warrior, a brilliant tactician and strategist. After the battle of Solway Firth with the English, he is captured, age 16, and handed to the French, whom he serves in the galleys. Later he is an outlaw, but establishes his own mercenary troop that also serves the Crown.

Dunnett says that Lymond is modelled on her husband, Alastair, as noted, editor of The Scotsman.

Francis has few close friends. Perhaps the closest is Jerrot Blyth, whom he knows from childhood. He has close working/drinking relationships with the pirate Thomson, mahout extraordinary Archie Abernethy (Abernaci), sailing master Mick Crackbene, gunner and siege master John Le Grant, Border barons and raiders the Scots (of Buccleuch), Philippa (Fippy) Somerville of Flaw Valley, near Hexham, the blind but insightful Christine Stewart, and lover Oonagh O’Dwyer. He has a close relationship with Kiaya Khatun (more below). Bigtime enemies are Graham Mallet and Margaret Douglas, Countess of Lennox (who pops up in Hilary Mantel).

What is he really like? Highly intelligent, ascetic – but known to get drunk with pirates to get them on his side. He also has extended periods on the wagon. He is not always likeable – indeed at times he is infuriating. A Scots patriot? Vain? – wearing fine jewels. Not much sense of humour, except in a few wild bursts. Treats some friends badly, sometimes for their own good.

Key themes

A key theme in the Niccoló and Lymond novels is opening up trade routes and trade relations. In the Niccoló novels this encompasses alum, silk, sugar and fish, with finance and insurance provided by banking. In the Lymond series the trade theme covers raw materials and manufactures. Geography and navigation are driven by trade (with some interesting asides on mathematics, e.g. with Richard (Diccon) Chancellor and John Dee). Slave-powered galleys dominate in season but sail is developing.

There are also important power struggles within and between countries and empires. For example, the Emperor Charles V and his son Philip II of Spain (husband of Mary Tudor) are aligned with Burgundy and the Pope against France (allied to the Ottomans), while the Italian states (especially Venice and Genoa) war with each other and are busy trading across Asia, against the background of the Plague, the development of banking, printing (including forbidden Bibles), the Renaissance and the Reformation (with copious burnings in England). England is periodically at odds with Scotland and France as well as carrying on its own internecine domestic power struggles of the Roses variety. Inevitably, espionage is a key feature that places our main characters in some danger at different times.

At the other, more personal end of the spectrum, legitimacy is an obsession in both series of books, grating with Nicolas and, maybe more so with Lymond. This seems at odds with the number of affairs recorded in the books, and the openly acknowledged illegitimate offspring of the times.

If this all seems very serious, there are some wildly funny scenes, see Claes (Nicolas) and friends sailing the Duke of Burgundy’s new bathtub into Bruges, or Thaddy Boy’s riotous behaviour at the French court….

Nicolas’ sexuality is occasionally ambivalent, I think, but Dunnett’s coy description of physical relationships left me wondering if I read it right. Certainly, in Trebizond homosexual relationships were common enough in the Greek/Byzantine tradition, and Nicolas may have yielded to the Emperor David and Zacco of Cyprus, but there is always a deliberate element of uncertainty in the writing. Lymond’s sexual orientation seems (fairly?) straight, but there are also some moments of gay interactions.

Interesting historical characters in the novels

The novels include interactions with important historical characters, and more can be found in Elspeth Morrison. These characters include the early Stewart royals (James II-IV) and family, Marie de Guise and her daughter Mary Stewart,[[1]](#footnote-1) Mary Tudor (wife of Phillip II, son of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V), Elizabeth I, French Valois kings (notably Henry II and wife Catherine de Medici), Ivan the Terrible, Nostradamus, Scottish, English and French nobility, the Medicis (Cosimo...), Juan de Homedés (Grand Master of the Knights of St John), Suleiman the Magnificent (and some of his 300 consorts), James of Lusignan (Zacco, maybe played by Johnny Depp in a movie?), David (Emperor of Trebizond), Anselm Adorne (Bruges), Uzum Hasan (ruler of Persia), corsair Dragut Rais and more. Margaret Douglas, Countess of Lennox (or is she?) – aunt to Darnley (future husband of Mary Stewart) – is a highly dangerous character with aspirations through her blood lines and marriage to both the English and Scottish thrones.

Another fact-is-stranger-than-fiction character who makes frequent appearances in the Niccoló series is the Franciscan Ludovico de Severi da Bologna, extensively discussed in Elspeth Morrison (and the subject of a series of novels by Marguerite McLaughlin, as well as popping up in the TV series about the Borgias). He travels incessantly between Western capitals and the Middle East, where he is known as the Patriarch of Antioch. He urges financing for and active participation in Crusades essentially against the Ottoman Empire.

Then there is the famous French naturalist, Pierre Gilles d’Albi, whom we encounter in the Lymond Chronicles dissecting a giraffe in the courtyard of the English consulate in Aleppo. Lymond also meets Diccon Chancellor, who finds the route around the North Cape to Russia and leads the Muscovy merchant company there for trading. And in London Lymond also meets John Dee, semi-Welsh mathematician, who advises on a future route after Chancellor’s demise, and Sir Henry Sidney, a courtier and diplomat, who partially finances these explorations.

The interactions between the principal characters and these historical characters are a key interest in the books, since Nicolas and Lymond are barely diplomatically polite to royals with the power of life and death. So Nicolas goes politely head on with some of the Stewarts and Lymond with the Czar, Suleiman, Marie de Guise….

Principal locations

Bruges, Burgundy, Edinburgh, Stirling, Berwick (and surrounding areas in Scottish Lowlands and Borders), London, Paris (+Blois, Lyon…), the Italian states (Genoa, Florence, Venice…), Cairo, Sinai, Malta, Cyprus, Moscow, Trebizond (Trabzon), Tripoli, Algiers, Funchal, The Gambia, Timbuktu.

A number of these locations (plus some redundancies) from the Niccoló series may be viewed in <https://wikivisually.com/wiki/The_House_of_Niccol%C3%B2>

Images of places and characters from the Lymond series may be viewed at:

<https://lymondchronicles.tumblr.com/>

Synopsis of the series [I see you have lifted big chunks of text from Wikipedia. Suggest you say so!]

1. House of Niccoló

**Niccolò Rising** (1986): Set largely in Flanders, Burgundy, and Italy in 1460. In this book, the reader is introduced to the principal characters of the series and the tensions between them. They include the rich Bruges merchants, like Anselm Adorne, a de facto royal, and the tearaway youths who surround Claes (Nicolas) and their romances. We learn too of trade with rivals Venice, Genoa and Florence as the great trading galleys arrive with some ceremony. Nicolas has an affair with Katelina who has his son but she pretends its father is Simon.

In this book, Nicolas develops from a dyeworks apprentice to become the husband of the owner of the dyeworks, Marian de Charretty. He comes up with the idea of developing a courier service to Florence, crossing the dangerous, snow-bound high passes into Italy, where he meets the de Medicis.

**Spring of the Ram** (1987): Set largely in [Trebizond](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empire_of_Trebizond) (now Trabzon), last remaining outpost of the Byzantine empire, on the Black Sea, in 1461. With Western support against the Ottomans still unsolidified, [David of Trebizond](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_of_Trebizond) prematurely asks the Sultan for a remission of the tribute paid by his predecessor. Even worse, he makes these demands through the envoys of Uzun Hassan, ruler of Persia, who makes even more arrogant demands on behalf of their master. Sultan Mehmed responds by sending a fleet under his admiral Kassim Pasha towards Trebizond while he leads an army eastward from Bursa [Western Anatolia] eastward. The city and the Empire fall. At the end of the siege, Nicolas captures a ship from the Genoese Pagano Doria (who had eloped with the pre-pubescent Catherine de Charretty, daughter of Marian), and sets off for Venice with a fortune in gold, silks, alum and rare manuscripts. (By this time Marian is dead).

**Race of Scorpions** (1989): 1462-1463. In the Italian wars, Nicolas is kidnapped by the Venetians and taken to Cyprus, where he is obliged to assist Zacco (James II de Lusignan) in his struggle against his half-sister, Carlotta, for control of the island kingdom. In Cyprus Nicolas marries Primaflora, a beautiful courtesan, but he is ordered to divorce her by Zacco, who has taken a fancy to her. Katelina has been visiting Cyprus, where the St Pol family has sugar plantations. (Enter her husband’s nephew, Diniz, who tries to kill Nicolas.) She and Nicolas kiss and make up but she dies in the siege of Famagusta, which has been engineered by Nicolas. Gelis, her sister, blames Nicolas for her death.

**Scales of Gold**(1991): 1464-1467. Set largely in Venice, Portugal, Madeira and Mali, during a long voyage to discover the source of West African gold and a West-East route to the Christian Ethiopian kingdom of [Prester John](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prester_John). In Funchal, Nicolas renews his acquaintance with Katelina’s sister, Gelis, who, with her companion Bel of Cuthilgardie and Diniz, joins Nicolas on the Africa adventure, in part to get information to pin the blame for Katelina’s death on him, but she seemingly succumbs to his charms and later marries him, only to engage in a prolonged battle over access to their son, whom she (falsely) claims to have conceived with Simon de St Pol, Nicolas’ father(?). They are successful in obtaining gold by trading but half is put on Nicolas’ ship, which is captured by pirates/enemies on the return trip to Europe.

**The Unicorn Hunt** (1993): 1468-1470. Nicolas moves to Scotland to set up a business. He helps Willie Roger (non-fictional) produce a major musical spectacle for James III and Margaret of Denmark. Set in Scotland, Flanders, Florence, the Tyrol (where Nicolas discovers a divining capability), Venice (for Mardi Gras), Egypt, the Sinai Peninsula and Cyprus (still searching for his stolen gold). Nicolas responds to Gelis' challenge and attempts to find his son, whom she [Katelina?] has secreted from him. He also increasingly competes with his now friend, Anselm Adorne, who is spending more time in Scotland, where he has important business.

**To Lie with Lions** (1995): 1471-1473. Set largely in Scotland, Iceland and Flanders. The “lions” are a reference to the rulers of Burgundy and France, Venice and Cyprus, England and Scotland, Islam and Christendom with whom Nicolas has financial dealings. The trip to Iceland introduces the young Katelijn – Kathi – Sersanders (Adorne’s young and perspicacious niece), who, together with her soon-to-be husband Robin of Berecrofts, manages to join several of Nicolas’ travels.

Gelis claims she has won the war with Nicolas because she has secretly been working for years for the Vatachino bank. But Jordan de St Pol (Nicolas’ grandfather) shows that Nicholas knew of Gelis’ connection with the Vatachino and skilfully played it. It also seems that his projects in Scotland, from the elaborate nativity play and the Iceland expedition which brought him a barony, to more secret investments of the Bank’s and the country’s money in worthless mines, poisoned grains and debased coinage, were meant in fact to wreck the country financially. This is supposedly some kind of vengeance on the country whose gentry, the St Pols (later, the Scots Semples – a link with Sybilla in the Lymond series), had terrified and rejected Nicolas’ mother, and Nicolas himself, 30 years earlier. Even his friends desert him. Nicolas agrees with them, resigns and heads off anonymously to Poland for burial. Or, possibly, resurrection.

**Caprice and Rondo** (1997): 1474-1476. Set largely in Italy, Poland, the Crimea, Persia, Russia, and Flanders/Burgundy. Nicolas teams up with Pauel Benecke, a Danziger pirate, whom he had captured in Iceland. He is drawn back into finance as an advisor. He is also lured from Danzig to Crimea and points east, to help long-term associate Julius (now a bank partner and married to the beautiful and wealthy Countess Anna – oh, really?), who is in competition with Adorne, and pushed by wannabe puppet-master Ludovico for his own crusading reasons. They are accompanied by Kathi Sersanders and Robin, who follow to try to get Nicolas back on the straight and narrow.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, Gelis and Tobie (Dr Tobias) try to trace some of Nicolas’ family history: the loving and terrified mother Sophie; the brutal uncle Jaak de Fleury; the young ‘aunt’, Adelina, also abused and abandoned. And the grandfather, Thibault de Fleury, long-rumoured imbecile, whom Gelis and Tobie discover still exercising, despite paralysis and disease, those supreme gifts for mathematics and music, witty puzzles and detached analysis.

In the East, Countess Anna, who tries to seduce Nicolas and wreck his commercial and political world, turns out to be Adelina – his grandfather’s child. But Nicolas, master of the interlocking wheels of plot, has in fact recognized her and works to draw her safely east. Nicolas and Gelis are reconciled and he is also restored to his family.

On the larger stage, Nicolas sees Burgundy collapse with the death of its duke and the wreck of its army at the siege of Nancy.

**Gemini** (2000): 1477-1483. Scotland, 1477. The cast is assembled for the final act. Nicolas – soon joined by family and friends – pursues his objectives amid a complex power struggle centring on the Scottish royal family, the powerful merchant class, the clergy, the English, the French, the Burgundians. Nicolas meets again with James III of Scotland and his rebellious siblings, the St. Pols (Jordan, Simon and young Henry), Mistress Bel of Cuthilgurdy, David de Salmeton (ex-Vatachino), and Anselm Adorne and Kathi. As the secrets of his birth come to light, he has to decide whether he desires to establish a future in Scotland for himself and his family, and a home for his descendants.

1. The Lymond Chronicles

**The Game of Kings** (1961): In 16th-century Scotland, Francis Crawford of Lymond, Master of Culter, is a charismatic figure: polyglot scholar, soldier, musician, master of disguises, nobleman– and accused outlaw. After five years in exile, Lymond has recently returned to Scotland, in defiance of Scottish charges against him for pro-English treason and murder. He leads a band of mercenaries and ruffians. However, Lymond has returned with the goal of proving his innocence and restoring his name, but to do so, he must find the man who framed him and condemned him to two years as a French galley slave. His family, the Crawfords, cannot avoid becoming entangled in the complex politics between England and Scotland, including the Anglo-Scottish wars, Scotland's alliance with France, and skirmishes in the Borders region.

The novel is constructed as an intricate mystery, punctuated by set pieces of adventure, high comedy and intense drama. Lymond leaves no one indifferent. [Margaret Douglas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Douglas), Countess of Lennox (with a place in the line of succession in England and Scotland), is a one-time friend who becomes a mortal enemy. A minor character at this stage, Philippa Somerville from near Hexham, creates problems but reappears in a critical role in later novels. Betrayals and double-crosses, both potential and actual, abound.

A number of historical persons appear in the novel, many as important characters. They include members of the Scott clan, including [Sir Walter Scott of Buccleuch](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Scott_of_Branxholme_and_Buccleuch) (several centuries before the writer), his wife, Janet Beaton, and his son William Scott of Kincurd, who becomes Lymond's second-in-command in his band of outlaws; [Marie de Guise](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_of_Guise), the Queen Dowager of Scotland, and her young daughter, [Mary, Queen of Scots](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary%2C_Queen_of_Scots); and members of the Douglas family, including [Archibald Douglas, 6th Earl of Angus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archibald_Douglas%2C_6th_Earl_of_Angus), his brother Sir George Douglas, his daughter [Margaret,](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Douglas) Countess of Lennox (niece of [Henry VIII](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_VIII_of_England)), and Margaret's husband [Matthew Stewart, 4th Earl of Lennox](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew_Stewart%2C_4th_Earl_of_Lennox), a potential claimant to the Scottish throne if the young Mary, Queen of Scots, were to die. The English military leaders responsible for prosecuting the War of [The Rough Wooing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rough_Wooing), Sir William Grey and [Lord Thomas Wharton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Wharton%2C_1st_Baron_Wharton), also have prominent roles.

**Queen’s Play** (1964): Lymond plays Thaddy Boy Ballagh, adviser to the Irish Royal Phelim O’LiamRoe, who is making a state visit to France. In fact, Lymond is on an unofficial mission at the behest of Marie de Guise, to protect the young queen, Mary Stewart, from killers who have their own eyes on the Scottish throne. On the side, Lymond has a passionate affair with Oonagh O´Dwyer, (ex?) mistress of The O’Connor, who is to give him a son (probably).

**The Disorderly Knights** (1966): His reputation freshly restored after his actions in France, Lymond travels to [Malta](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malta), home of the Knights Hospitaller of St John, just before the Ottoman Turks lay siege to it. There he becomes embroiled in a contest of wits with Gabriel, who may or may not be a living saint, and discovers a secret that transforms that intellectual contest into a power struggle for his native Scotland.

**Pawn in Frankincense** (1969): Lymond embarks upon a hunt for Oonagh’s son, crossing Europe from Baden, accompanied by childhood friend Jarret Blyth and Philippa (as well as Mr Fixit, Onophrion), to Lyon to Marseilles and North Africa following the trail of clues his malevolent adversary has laid for him. In Lyon he collects the bejewelled spinnet, a gift from the French king for the sultan, and its builder Gaultier and assistant, the all-important Marthe, who accompany him on the trip to make sure it works on arrival. Lymond and Philippa meet the Dame de Doutance, who forecasts their future. Reaching the glittering court of the Ottoman Sultan [Suleiman the Magnificent](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suleiman_the_Magnificent), Lymond, now unknowingly drugged with opium, has to win freedom for himself, the child and his companions in a lethal chess game.

In order to protect the child Kuzum, seized for the seraglio, Philippa (Fippy) enters the harem, learning the arts of the 300 consorts of Suleiman, especially Kiaya Khatun, who plays an important role in the next book.

Seemingly tangentially, Gaultier, Marthe and Gilles uncover Constantine’s treasure of relics in the reservoirs under the Hagia Sophia. But this plays a key role in the great escape from Istanbul. Marthe, whose relationship with Lymond is revealed late in the book, is mostly antagonistic towards Lymond throughout this novel but helps him recover from his enforced opium addiction.

**The Ringed Castle** (1971): Lymond arrives at the semi-barbaric court of the Russian Tsar Ivan the Terrible, and begins the difficult task of creating the Tsar’s military preparedness against a number of external threats. There are some scary interviews with Ivan, but Lymond becomes his trusted advisor in military matters while also being called in the middle of the night to play chess.

Meanwhile, Philippa, invited to the court of the not-pregnant Mary Tudor, sets out to discover the truth about Lymond’s parentage (leading to Lymond confronting his great uncle, who is blackmailing Lymod’s mother, Sybilla). She meets the great navigator, Diccon (Richard) Chancellor, who is preparing for a second trip to Russia around the North Cape. Chancellor is helped by Lymond in Russia. Lymond survives several assassination attempts by agents from England (originating with Margaret Douglas?) as well as local rivals. Some breath-taking scenes travelling north in reindeer-pulled sledges and hunting with Lymond’s golden eagle, Slata Baba.

After some success against the Tartars, the Tsar sends Lymond back to England (and to personal danger) to seek help from Mary Tudor in the form of arms and technical advisors to help prepare his defences against European enemies and eventually the Ottomans. There is a hazardous return trip with Chancellor as winter breaks and ships are lost. In London, there are negotiations between the Muscovy Company and the Russian ambassador, while Lymond tries to negotiate for munitions and technical help for the Tsar. Lymond is suspected of espionage while an attempt is made against the Crown, and war breaks out between Spain (partly financed by Philip II’s wife, Mary Tudor) and France. He has another confrontation with the dangerous Margaret Douglas. While the trade negotiations are successful, the munitions sales are forbidden, and although Lymond tries to return to Moscow he is warned that the Tsar has turned against him. In the end he is seized by his friends and put on a ship for France.

**Checkmate** (1975): The final novel in the Lymond series takes place in 1557, when Lymond is again in France, manipulated into leading an army against the combined forces of Spain and England. In Lyon, with Spaniards at the gates, he meets up again with Jerrot, now unhappily married to Marthe, Lymond’s sister, and Philippa, still inquiring into Lymond’s parentage. A gripping chase by paid killers in dark, foggy Lyon. As a mark of his military successes, Lymond is invested in the prestigious order of Knights of St Michael. In a foray into Picardy Lymond is captured by the Spaniards, but after providing false information is rescued by his own men. Calais falls and France rejoices… Lymond is a hero.

Meanwhile, the now 14-year-old Mary Queen of Scots prepares to marry the French Dauphin. Among the Scottish officials arriving to conduct the complex financial, political and religious marriage negotiations is Lymond’s brother, Richard, who brings along Sybilla, with whom Lymond has not been reconciled. In Paris, the mysteries of Lymond’s and Marthe’s parentage are revealed. Some tense confrontations. Blackmail is uncovered and justice meted out. Final Franco/Spanish-English battles. Bitter meetings with the king and the cardinal (de Guise). Return to England, imprisonment, release and final meetings, including with Margaret Douglas Tense to the end, twists, final revelations. Some live happily ever after... and some don’t….

What Dunnett does well/badly

Although there are recaps in the various books, some might find these rather obscure – they do not tell all. Others will enjoy, rather like figuring out a mystery novel. The principal characters can also be singularly irritating at times but some such behaviour (usually) has an eventual benign explanation.

The books have some outrageous humour – think of Claes in Bruges, Thaddy Boy Ballagh in Blois and Prince Phelims O’LiamRoe’s’ intended royal tennis match with the king in Paris – etc. See also the play enactment in the House of Revels and Masques.

There is detailed description of period costumes, especially ladies’ dresses with endless pearls and jewels stitched on. This may not be to everyone’s taste.

Some may find the use of language(s) – lots of old English, French and Scots, as well as Latin – and the inclusion of poetry and philosophical passages to be overdone, especially at the start of the 1st Lymond (i.e. 1st book written in two series, but historically the second). Was she trying too hard to impress initially? But then the rhythm settles down to frame a gripping story. (Elspeth Morrison and Richenda Todd published an edited version of the poetry in the Lymond novels, based on material found after Dunnett’s death).

The love scenes are remarkably few, thankfully – worthy of Mills & Boon.

Dunnett is inclined to overuse “beautiful” and “magnificent”.

All told, Dunnett’s Nicolas and Lymond novels display remarkable scholarship and years of research.

Recommendation – Dunnett recommends reading Lymond first. I prefer the chrono sequence, having admittedly read both series first in the Lymond, Niccoló order. Note the first book in the Lymond Chronicles was the first written, and I feel that she took a couple of chapters to find her rhythm. (Indeed, I have read some comments by readers who could not get past the first 50 pages but raced along after that, so there is a suggestion to start at Chapter 3.) Having skipped through some descriptive passages to get on with the story line, on re—reading I found these to be rather relaxing passages between periods if high suspense.

**The Guardian, Obituary, Magnus Linklater Thu 15 Nov 2001 [if this is lifted verbatim using cut and paste, I won’t bother rereading it]**

**Dorothy Dunnett**

Writer and artist who researched history and wrought from it more than 20 novels spanning continents and centuries

Rarely can a contemporary author have elicited such devotion from her fans as Dorothy Dunnett, who has died, aged 78. The condolences on her website roll on and on. Her readers, from across the world, quote lovingly from her works. "Our cynosure is gone," says one. "I am sick with loss," adds another. "All that was bold and noble and happy," begins one letter. "She simply changed my life," says another.

They speak of the bond built up over 40 years, and more than 20 long novels, between an Edinburgh housewife, who began, at the prompting of her husband, to delve into Scottish history, and the readers who found their lives transformed by what she wrote.

The two lengthy and complex series of historical novels that she produced - the six-volume Lymond Chronicles and the eight-volume House of Niccoló - recreated medieval Europe, and brought to life a cast of characters so meticulously researched and lovingly described that they became as real to their followers as their own families.

Aficionados of the Dunnett oeuvre formed their own societies, met regularly at international conferences, and swapped theories about the puzzles and the sub-plots that the author sewed so carefully throughout the developing epic. When, last year, it became clear that Lady Dunnett was approaching the last volume of the Niccoló series, when all would be revealed, agonised readers begged her not to die before completing it.

"Please write the last chapter first in case the worst happens," said one. "My life would not be worth living if you were to go before revealing the outcome." She did not let them down. Earlier this year, with the publication of Gemini 2000, she brought the massive epic to an end. And she disclosed that she had worked out the ending long before. "I almost didn't have the heart to tell them that there was absolutely nothing anybody could do to influence the outcome," she said. "It's been planned for the last 14 years."

Nothing in the background of Dorothy Halliday, daughter of a mining engineer from Fife and a mother from Birmingham, suggested that she would be a writer, though her mother was a prolific correspondent - on the night before she married, she and her husband-to-be burned a thousand love letters she had written to him, because they did not have the space to store them.

An only child, Dorothy went to James Gillespie's High School for girls, where she overlapped with Muriel Spark, and was taught by Miss Kay, the model for Jean Brodie. She discovered a talent for painting, and contemplated a career as an artist, but war broke out, and at the age of 16 she went to work as a civil servant, becoming an assistant press officer.

There, later, she met Alastair Dunnett, who had been seconded from the Daily Record to be chief press officer to the secretary of state. She was much younger than him - 23 to his 38 - and very much in awe of this formidable newspaperman. When they married in 1946 and he returned to journalism, be coming first editor of the Record, then the Scotsman, she found herself in the role of editor's wife, entertaining high-powered guests and attending the social functions that came with the job.

She once said: "To be consort of a newspaper editor is a semi-full-time job." Both of them were enthusiastic about the arts, and travelled widely throughout Scotland and abroad. She had become an accomplished portrait painter, accepting commissions to paint leading Scots figures of the day, exhibiting regularly at the Royal Scottish Academy.

Only after the death of her father, which caused her great misery, did Alastair suggest that she take up writing. She began researching the childhood of Mary Queen of Scots, and invented a character, Francis Crawford of Lymond, a dashing Scots mercenary, who travelled widely, visiting the French and English courts, caught up in intrigues across 16th- century Europe.

The Game of Kings, her first novel, was rejected by English publishers because it was considered too long, but was spotted in New York by Lois Cole, who had published Gone with the Wind. It came out in 1961 and was an instant best-seller, marking the beginning of a remarkable fictional journey, which took Dunnett round the world in pursuit of historical detail.

She researched the Russia of Ivan the Terrible and the Constantinople of Suleiman the Magnificent. She found out the music that was played at the medieval courts of Europe, the dress worn, and the gossip swapped. At one time she had learned so much about the Edinburgh Tolbooth in 1480 that she knew who had lived in every room and the rent they paid. She travelled as inconspicuously as possible, armed with essentials, such as a screwdriver, loo paper, and a twist of wire to hold shut doors without locks.

"Facts are the soil from which the story grows," she said once. "Imagination is a last resort."

The Lymond Chronicles were succeeded by House of Niccoló, which followed Nicholas de Fleury, illegitimate son of a Scottish nobleman, and a brilliant mathematician, to Florence, where he gets caught up in the rise of the Medici bank in the 15th century, and travels to Ireland, Poland and Africa.

Her books were peppered with puzzles, intrigues and tantalising clues which entranced her readers and drew them on to the next volume. They were also powerful love stories, and her women were among her strongest characters.

In the midst of this she spent five years researching the life of the real Macbeth, which resulted in the novel King Hereafter. She claimed to have proved that Macbeth and the Viking Earl Thorfinn of Orkney were the same character - and was frustrated when historians failed to take the theory seriously; she reckoned that she had done far more work on the period than most of them. She also wrote, for light relief, thrillers featuring a portrait painter and spy called Johnson Johnson; they came out under her maiden name, Dorothy Halliday.

She was given an OBE in 1992, and became Lady Dunnett in 1995 when her husband was knighted. She was a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, and served on committees and boards concerned with books, films and cultural matters. She also was a non-executive director of Scottish Television for 13 years.

Her life was not without tragedy - her first child was still-born. Later, she had two sons, Ninian and Mungo, who produced four grandchildren. She was a woman of great charm, fascinated as much by Scottish arts and politics as by medieval Europe.

Although both she and Alastair, who died in 1998, lived a busy life, their favourite relaxation was sitting in their Morningside home, with a glass of malt whisky, discussing the day's events. There was always much to talk about.

EDITED EXCERPTS [reproduced here using cut and paste?]

NICCOLÓ

Niccoló Rising ch 1 (Claes in bathtub - edited excerpt)

QUOTE

It began mildly enough, the awkward chain of events that was to upset the bankers so much. It began with sea, and September sunlight, and three young men lying stripped to their doublets in the Duke of Burgundy’s bath. Of the three, Claes and Felix were watching the canal bank for girls. Julius, his instincts blunted by an extra decade, was content to sink back, agreeably fortified, and forget he was anyone’s tutor. A good astrologer would have told him to get out at once. The sun warmed the bath, and the water bore it along on the last stage of its meandering journey. From the leadfounder’s in England it had crossed the narrow sea to the Low Countries in a serviceable wind-battered caravel. It had been unloaded with some trouble in the crowded harbour at Sluys, and strapped with some trouble athwart a canal boat with a scratch crew of oarsmen. And now, here it was. Lumped with cherubs: a bath for the noble Philip, Duke of Burgundy, Count of Flanders, Margrave of the Holy Roman Empire and all the rest of his high-yielding honours. A communal bathing-basin now on its way to the Duke’s occasional residence in the merchant city of Bruges. And working their passage inside it, Julius, Felix and Claes. For the moment, there was nothing to do. In the peace, a wave of philosophy overcame Julius. ‘What,’ he said, ‘is happiness?’ He opened his eyes. ‘A new hound,’ said Felix, who was seventeen…‘The kind with big ears.’ … ‘A new girl,’ offered Claes. He jerked open the wine flask, gripping the neck like the hock of a stallion. ‘The kind with…’ ‘That’s enough,’ Julius said. Philosophy was wasted on both of them.

…

The sound of rushing water told him they were approaching the lock... On the other side of the boat, Julius helped throw up the ropes at the sealock, and heaved up the statutory can of Bruges beer to the lock-keeper. The lighter entered [the lock, and behind it the tidal gates waded creaking together. The lock-keeper, stowing his beer, walked off to open the sluices. …Immediately outside the sluice another barge, seaward bound, lay double-moored to the bank, waiting for them to emerge. It, too, lay low in the water. It, too, bore only one item of cargo: a single thickly wrapped object some fifteen feet long... ‘What’s that thing in the lighter? …. ‘Important cargo,’ said Julius. ‘Look. It’s got Duke Philip’s own seals all over it.’ Hence, of course, the escorting soldiers and the other overdressed dignitaries…

[Just then] a jet of real virulence suddenly sprang from the wall and cascaded over the barge. It increased in power. It began to fill, with dynamic effect, a corner of the Duke of Burgundy’s bath, which proceeded to urge its barge sideways… further discharge, more violent than any so far, hit the opposite side of the bath. It started to spin just as the lock gates on the inland side proceeded to open, and the mooring ropes fell… It was Felix who said, ‘We’re going backwards.’ ‘Sideways,’ said Claes. He said it thoughtfully. ‘Forward,’ said Julius.

The lock gates continued to open and the Duke of Burgundy’s bath prepared, giddily, to emerge into the canal. The lightermen jabbed with their paddles. The leaden rim of the bath rose, sank and rose. The slop in the bath flowed backwards and forwards, soaking their sandy boots and their hose… The bath-rim struck the wall with a clank and drove itself and its barge swirling out of the lock where it bounced off one gate and bucked off to visit the other.

Julius could see what they were shouting about. He could see – everyone could – what was going to happen. He had time to wonder what was in the ducal parcel so handsomely stowed in the long barge at the side of the waterway. He had time, even, to examine it as the Duke of Burgundy’s bath leaped towards the shuddering outward-bound lighter containing the Duke of Burgundy’s personal cargo. The two boats collided. The lighter, held by its ropes, had no way to escape as the boat containing Julius, Felix and Claes pitched into its planks and sheared its side off. The bath tilted, ejecting Claes and Julius briskly into the waterway. It sluiced Felix down to its deep end where he wallowed, his submerged hand firmly clutching its coping. Then it righted itself. The crippled outward-bound lighter tugged its mooring ropes, burst them, and shed its cargo with languor into the watery gloom, capping it with its own weedy bottom…

‘What have you done? What have you done? You have sent Martha, you fools, to the bottom!’… Who was steering?’

No one had been steering. Everyone had been steering. One of the lightermen, pressed, admitted suddenly that that apprentice called Claes had been steering.

All eyes on Claes. My God: good-natured, randy, innocent Claes, who knew nothing but how to make jokes and mimic his betters. Claes, with the biggest mouth in Flanders. Claes who, standing in a pool of light mud, opened his eyes, large as moons, and said, Of course, minen heere, he had been steering, but not inside the lock. …. His hair, darkened to the colour of gravy, hung in screws over his eyes and coiled over his cheeks and dripped into the frayed neck of his doublet. He shook himself, and they all heard his boots give a loud, sucking sound. A liberal smile crossed Claes’ face, and faded a little when no one responded. He said, ‘Minen heere, we did our best, and got a ducking for it, and lost our day’s sport and our crossbows. And at least the Duke still has his bath.’

The serving-girl with the pail was still there. Perhaps Claes felt her eyes on him. He looked up, and found her, and gave her one of his happiest smiles. Mary Mother, thought Julius. He doesn’t even know what is happening. Should I tell him? That the Duke’s cargo that sank was a gift – a gift from Duke Philip of Burgundy to his dear nephew James, King of Scotland. A fifteen-foot gift of some import. To be plain, a five-ton war cannon, grimly christened Mad Martha.

UNQUOTE

Etc etc

The Unicorn Hunt (Edited excerpt FROM Chapter 41)

Nicolas (Claes) and Gelis, still pursuing their feud, meet at St Catherine’s Monastery in Sinai. The extract is intended to convey the tension between them. It does not cover the exchange on (the existence of?) their son whom Gelis has hidden away, and whom Nicolas has been seeking, including by his gift of divining.

QUOTE

ONCE UP IN the wind it was bitterly cold, and the chipped stars and faded moonlight chilled the spirit. She had been cold long before she set out. She had climbed Gebel Musa twice already, in daylight. She knew the slow way, the path that camels and asses could take. She knew the direct, punishing way, the Sikket Sayidna Musa, the path of Moses which led through the steep ravine at the back of the monastery to the foot of the mountain, and then by graded inclines to the well – the water of Moses – where, in sunlight, the sweet water was desperately welcome. It gave strength for the next ascent, to the narrow plateau upon which had been built a stone chapel. In the dark, now, she could hardly see it. But she had a good memory, and a sense of direction and of levels, and so far she had hardly stumbled. She rested a little, to keep her strength, then crossed the other ravine to the first of the gates. The tall stone archway at which, once, pilgrims were stopped to make their confession. There was no one there now. After that, she was glad that she was light-footed and strong, for the stiff climb began. From this point there were steps, over three thousand of them, mounting steeply to the night sky between the towering, slabby walls of the mountain, chill on either side in the darkness. There was no resting place, then, until the second arch, which led to the broad grassy slope on which were set the triple chapels of St Marina the Virgin, Elisha, and Elijah. The last place one could stop was a ledge just before the summit, where she remained for a moment, listening. There was no sound, before or behind. She was alone. She climbed the last hundred steps to the uneven spread of the pinnacle. In daylight, one made this final step burned by the sun, drenched with sweat, aching and breathless from the climb, from fear of the height, from wonder at what one could see of the world laid below. The Mount inhabited by God and frequented by angels, where trumpets rang, and the Lord spoke unto Moses. The Mount of the Law, to which men looked for justice…

…As the sounds of movement came closer, she stood. One man’s footsteps, irregular because of the irregular rock, and interspersed with the click and thud of a stave. The brighter light of a brand; a burning brand, certainly consumed and therefore several times refreshed, and held by the same person: there was no guide, no servant here. And then, immense in the darkness, moving up the final few steps, streaming with fire and with shadow, [Nicolas]. She heard his breathing. At the top he came to rest, as if waiting. He had paused before; she had heard the delays. He was not in a hurry. She thought of stepping forward; forcing him into premature speech, but she knew him too well. Unless it suited him, he wouldn’t respond. And when he did respond, every word would have its place in the game. The resumed game. The different game. All this time he was looking at her; one sexless, anonymous figure facing another across the limited space. When at length he moved, he merely walked forward two paces and stopped again. … He said, ‘C’est alors la fin? J’espère que oui.’ I take it this is the end? I hope so. She used the same elegant language they both spoke. ‘The end of what, mon époux? Of our match, after only two years? Of life? Hardly.’ The word was licked from her tongue by the wind. She could hear his uninflected voice through the bluster of sound. ‘Comme il te plait…. ’ …

 He was holding something in his hand. ?...you recognise this? Your wedding ring.’ ‘Well, of course,’ she said. ‘I wanted you to know I was alive. I didn’t know you were going to give in. That is really what you mean? You can’t keep up? You want to end it?’

‘I am going to end it,’ he said. ‘But first, I want to know why you did it…. She said, ‘Then listen. My object is to remind you of pain, as often as possible, and for as long as possible…’

.After a while he said, ‘…give me your hand.’ Now it had come. Good or bad, the outcome was fixed. She stood while he crossed the short distance between them, and took her hand, and fitted the ring on her finger. The metal was cold. Then he said, ‘There was a ritual, the last time I did this.’ The embrace was all she expected: insult, threat, preliminary to what he had decided to do. His hands took hold of her back and her arm, forcing her close…

The sky flamed and far below them, acre upon acre, the mountains flickered, welling into the light. They were on the Mount of the Lord; and the edge was one step away. Nicholas said, ‘Walk over with me.’

UNQUOTE

LYMOND

The Game of Kings (Edited excerpt)

Lymond meets the young Mary Stewart at the Lake of Menteith, near Stirling Castle

QUOTE

The next day, the autumn trumpets gave tongue, the sun shone like copper, and a flaming row was taking place in the Priory cloisters. To the north the hills of Ben Dearg reared empurpled, and soft airs shuddered on the blue water. On Inchmahome, Discord beat against the ancient pillars, where five adults and a child sat or stood about the green cloisters. The Queen Dowager of Scotland was in a state of Gallic rage. ‘Will someone kindly inform me how this escapade has arrived?’ Thus, Mary of Guise, seated bolt upright in a carved chair. Croaking reply from a middle-aged nurse, white as her tortured apron. ‘Oh, Madame; that I dinna ken, the puir wee lassie …’ and she broke off, shooting a basilisk glance at a younger maid, completely overcome, who was being patted by Mariotta. The Dowager Lady Culter, who was also seated, wisely said nothing, partly out of diplomacy and partly from sheer respect for her vocal chords: a very small child with tousled red hair standing before her continued to hammer on her knee in a detached sort of way, screaming gibberish at the top of her voice. ‘Hurble-purple, hurble-purple, hurble-purple!’ chanted the child. ‘On the rivage, in broad daylight! Murder! Kidnap!’ ‘She’d cuddle a milk jug, the jaud!’ ‘Boo-hoo – hic – hoo!’

‘Elspet! You’ll be ill! Be quiet, now!’ ‘Hurble-purple, hurble-purple, hurble-purple!’ said the child with ascending power. Lady Culter winced slightly, and drawing her knee away, put out a kindly but restraining arm. She spoke briskly. ‘I doubt there’s no need to hunt for villains, Ma’am; the lass was scatterbrained, and Mistress Kemp as bad, to let her go off alone with the child. But there was no worse intention that I can see. Just an escapade.’ ‘Escapade!’ Sybilla, after a daunting glance at the hysterical Elspet, returned to her task. ‘Yes. The foolish girl had a tryst with one Perkin at Portend Farm, and the child wanted to visit the pleasance. There was a skiff unattended, and off they went to the shore, where Elspet apparently left Mary playing while she went up to the farm –’ ‘Alone and unattended,’ said outraged motherhood grimly. ‘And then of course my daughter is accosted, attacked! One hears her screams, the girl returns, thrusts her back into the boat and attempts to return unobserved. Oh, I grant you the girl Elspet is innocent: by returning she doubtless foiled the attempt. But how could such a thing be? Is there not a bodyguard, here at Inchmahome … attendants … the good fathers? Are there not armed men surrounding the lake, blocking the roads? Dame Sybilla, but for my daughter’s screams, where would she be now?’ ‘Sitting in the Pleasure Gardens, I imagine,’ said Lady Culter dryly, ‘although I must admit that the attractions of Perkin seem to have played ducks and drakes with our safety precautions. Suppose we ask the Queen’s Grace?’ Mary of Guise, Queen Dowager, stretched an arm and called her daughter. ‘Marie! Come and tell Maman what the ill-doing man did?’ ‘What ill-doing man?’ asked the red-haired child, trailing over the grass without lifting her dress, and proffering a sticky mouth. ‘Can I say my rhyme?’ Her Royal mother, ignoring this, wiped the mouth thoroughly with a clean handkerchief and said, ‘The man in the Pleasure Gardens, ma p’tite. What did he say?’ Her Most Noble Majesty Mary, crowned Queen of all Scotland, found her pomander and began to play with it, with unsavoury results. ‘He wasn’t a malfaisant. I liked him. Can I –’ ‘Mary, was he a monk?’ said Sybilla gently, mindful of one of the unlikelier aspects of Elspet’s story (‘But all the monks are at Sext’). ‘He was a nice monk,’ said the child, with a single inflection neatly robbing the statement of all value. She bit the pomander, spat, and relented. ‘He said the rhyme, and he knew my name.’ ‘But …’ said the Dowager Queen. ‘But …’ said Mariotta. ‘I wonder,’ said Lady Culter, recognizing defeat, ‘if it could be Dean Adam back from Cambuskenneth? He went last Monday, and I suppose – Or a wandering Observant? Oh well, he did her no harm –I think her screams were annoyance when Elspet lost her head and tried to get her into the boat and back.’ ‘They found no one?’ ‘No one. Lady Christian herself had been walking there, and heard no one at all in the gardens.’ ‘Can I,’ said the Queen’s Most Noble Majesty, with urgency, ‘say it now?’

‘What … I suppose so,’ said Maman, her brow still furrowed. ‘Eh bien,’ said Mary smoothly. She recited. ‘Hurble purple hath a red girdle A stone in his belly, A stake through his arse And yet hurble purple is never the worse. ‘What is it, what is it, what is it?’ roared the Queen. There was a shaken silence. Then Lady Culter, in a voice preternaturally grave, said (rather unkindly), ‘I think – it’s a hawthornberry, is it not, chérie?’ Her Majesty’s face fell.

…… (as is explained later…) [stop reading here?]

Christian laughed outright. ‘How absurd … “Comment le saluroye, quant point ne le congnois?” Of course I recognized who it was. Credit me with ears, at least.’ There was a moment more of the kind of constraint she remembered from their last interview in the cave, then the man beside her gave a mock sigh. ‘Forgive my obtuseness. My voice again? Crying the coronoch on high. I’m sorry about the uproar. I didn’t expect company, but even so, all would have gone well if that blasted girl hadn’t snatched the child so suddenly. Magnificent lungs for her age.’ They sat in the short grass in the middle of the maze a previous Earl of Menteith had designed on the north shore of the lake. Dusty box hedges with an unused air shut off any view of the water: from the rear a folly in marble overhung them. It was warm and still, as it had been at Boghall, where, as her prisoner and her patient, he had played the lute and sung to her of frogs. Christian hugged her knees. ‘But how did the child find you?’ He answered ruefully, ‘I fell asleep. Considerably more than doth the nightingale. And the next thing I knew she was sitting on my chest.’ ‘What did you say?’ said Christian, fascinated. ‘She said, “M. l’abbé” (you’ll have gathered I’m dressed like a magpie) – “M. l’abbé, you ’ave greatly insufficient of tonsure.” And I said, “Madame la reine d’Ecosse, you are greatly in excess of tonnage.” After which exchange of pleasantries …’ ‘She got off?’ ‘Not at all. She bounced like a cannon ball and said that Dédé –’ ‘Her pony.’ ‘–That Dédé had long yellow teeth; and did I know –’ ‘That,’ said Christian in chorus, ‘you can tell a person’s age from their teeth. That’s a favourite one.’ ‘Oh. Well, as you say. So she opened her mouth, and I pronounced her seven years of age, and she admitted to five. (What is she – four?) Then I opened my mouth –’ ‘What was it, a pebble?’ ‘ –I opened my mouth and received inside it a small fish, still resisting delivery to its Maker. After that –’ ‘But what did you do? With the fish?’ ‘I pretended to eat it,’ he said simply. ‘Then we played a game or two, and sang a bit, and discussed a number of subjects. Then the nursemaid, or whoever she was, arrived, and whipped off the child, crowing like the cocks of Cramond. And you know the echo, to boot.’

UNQUOTE

RINGED CASTLE edited excerpt

On return from Moscow, Lymond, Philippa and others visit the House of Revels and Masques which stores costumes and sets for royal spectacles. What happens is one of the few times we find Lymond exploding with laughter and also facing something of an epiphany. So….

In the warehouse, Ludovic, one of Lymond’s men returned with him for Moscow, finds a manuscript

QUOTE

‘My God,’ said Ludovic d’Harcourt, echoing the Yeoman of the Revels, for other reasons entirely. ‘Listen to this. Love and Life, by William Baldwyn. A Comedy concerning the Way to Life. There be in it of sundry personages 62, and the play is three hours long. I bring in a young man whom I name Lamuel, who hath a servant called Lob. These two will attempt the world to seek their fortune. They meet with Lust, Luck and Love. Lust promiseth them Lechery –’

‘I don’t believe it,’ Lymond said. ‘Be quiet,’ said Philippa. ‘Go on, Ludo.’ ‘They follow Luck and through Lechery be lost, then through Luck they recover. Luck bringeth them to Lordship, from which through … I can’t go on,’ said d’Harcourt, painfully. ‘It says all the players’ names begin with L.’ ‘And so they do,’ said Philippa, reading. ‘Leonard Lustyguts an Epicure. Lame Lazar a Spittleman. Liegerdemayn an Old Courtier; Lammarkin, a Lance knight; Little-lookedfor, Death; Layies Lechery a Sumtuous Hore … But the play is missing.’

‘They never did it,’ Nicholas Chancellor said. He, too, was flushed with pleasure, in this unforeseen romp in the Revels. ‘It was all full of Ls.’

‘I can guess,’ Philippa said. There was a wig box beside her. She hauled off the sock and jammed on her head a long flaxen wig, with a headpiece of spangled white sarsanet. ‘I’m Lechery, a Luscious Hore …’

‘Wait,’ said Lymond. His jerkin off, he was rummaging shirtsleeved through the stands: a moment later, he emerged with a long Turkey gown which he tossed to d’Harcourt. ‘Come on, Hospitaller. You’re Lame Lazar. Nicholas, you can be Luck. And’ – as Nicholas caught the red cloth cloak tossed him – ‘and I, of course, shall be Lamuel the Lewd.’ A satin doublet of hideous orange engulfed him for a moment, and then he pulled it down, and began to tramp, without progressing, before Philippa. ‘Now go on.’

‘I’ve forgotten … No, I haven’t,’ said Philippa. Long Sunday evenings of nonsensical charades with Kate and Gideon paraded before her, and evenings spent devising songs, and poems, and doggerel, with Ls or without … She drew breath and started, haltingly, making it up as she went. ‘I’m Lechery a Luscious Hore A Lady Loose who Lists to Lower Her Limbs upon a Lance Knight’s Lap His Lips to Buss and Cheeks to Clap …’

‘Very good. Not enough Ls in the last line,’ said Lymond critically.

‘Then you do better,’ said Philippa, incensed.

‘Gentlemen!’ said the Yeoman.

‘And I, Limp Lamuel Longing Sigh, Beside Light Lechery to Lie Lo Here I Learn my Lesson Lewd And Love and Lounge in Lassitude.’

‘What in God’s name is going on?’ said Sir Henry Sidney’s voice, from behind stacks of shelving.

‘Go on,’ said Philippa. ‘The Lazar.’

‘I can’t,’ said Ludovic d’Harcourt, clutching his gold gown about him.

‘Why not? Go on,’ said Philippa. ‘I can’t think of any words,’ said d’Harcourt apologetically.

‘Never mind,’ Lymond said. ‘Say after me: ‘Which I, Lame Lazar List to Cure, But Light beneath the Lady’s Lure And Lift my Crutch with Leprous Glee, And Leap upon the Lady’s Knee … Nicholas?’

‘You do mine,’ said Nicholas, glowing.

‘No, I’ll do it,’ said Philippa, feeling her oats. She thought. ‘But I, dear Luck, will Lead you all. On Lilied Lawns of Light to Loll (‘Bravo!’ said Lymond.) Where Lute and Lyre will Lilt their Lay (‘Oh, bravo!’) And Lull sweet Lovers at their Play!’ said Philippa triumphantly. triumphantly.

‘That’s really very good,’ said Sir Henry. ‘Is there more?’

‘Yes: Death,’ said Lymond. ‘Where are the Medioxes? Philippa?’

‘Up there. I’ll get them,’ Philippa said. Hampered by drakes’ necks, she clambered on to a middle shelf and from there made her way upwards.

‘Gentlemen!’ called Lymond warningly.

She called back, ‘It’s all right,’ and tossed him the death’s head, which he put on, while she perched where she was, observing approvingly.

 ‘Right?’ said Lymond. ‘Till Little-looked for Death appeared And Loathsome on the Lovers Leered And Laughter’s Lodge was Let to Fear And Love to Lugworms Fell …’

‘You’ve changed the metre,’ said Philippa. ‘I reserve the right,’ said Lymond, ‘to change the metre. Don’t interrupt.

‘Ah, Lamuel, lest your Life be Light Lament not for your Lost Delight Beshrew Loose Ladies in the Night Or …’ ‘Let me do it,’ said Philippa.

Lymond said, looking up, ‘That is robbery.’ ‘I don’t care. Let me do it. You got all the last verse.’ ‘All right,’ said Lymond generously. ‘It has to rhyme with fell.’

And from her high perch, happily, Philippa declaimed. ‘Ah, Lamuel, lest your Life be Light Lament not for your Lost Delight Beshrew Loose Ladies in the Night OR LANGUISH LOCKED IN L!!!’

There was a roar of applause, from friends, tailors and Yeoman, and Philippa fell off the stand. And, since the stand was not stable, it toppled with her, and striking the next stand, toppled that, which falling sideways, pushed a row of stands, with majestic slowness towards that part of the room where the paint and glue pots were standing. Chests opened. Hampers yawned. Cloth, clothes, bells, masks, heads, hay, swords, wigs and feathers erupted crashing upon floor and tables, while painters fled and tailors rose yelling and the explosions, continuing, dwindled; leaving nothing but silence, and the trickling of saffron, vermilion, yellow ochre, sap green and red lead, as they spread on the floor of the Revels.

UNQUOTE

1. Stewart, derived from “steward”, or Stuart in different authors. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)