





# **The Estate We're In**

John MacBeath



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## **Chapter 1**

### **The estate we're in: Murray's story**

While the beginning is customarily the best place to start there is never a beginning to anything, as history is defined by seminal events which determine its course. On the small private estate, twenty miles to the west of Inverness nothing much out of the ordinary ever happened, at least until the events of an unusually sunny September which would change everything – forever.

We were, and continue to be, seven households, our isolation from what is sometimes referred to as ‘the outside world’ fostering something of a siege mentality. In my sociology lectures at Robert Gordon University I sometimes refer to our small community as a prime example of propinquity theory, explaining what can

happen, by design or happenstance, when people are thrown together in close physical proximity.

The word ‘estate’ may conjure images of a suburban enclave of identical houses and nearly identical residents, but Inveresk estate is nothing so mundane. It had once been the grounds of a medieval castle, the coach house, servants’ quarters, and stables now converted to quirky dwellings while the site of the demolished castle is now a modern and (in the view of the longest established residents) ‘a pretentious three-storey manor’, home to the ill-fated Warren family.

Theirs is the last house on the tree-lined drive which runs from the imposing gates, bypassing six more modest dwellings of which ours is one. Our conservatory sits to the front of the house, directly on to road so allowing us to monitor our neighbours’ entries and exits, visitors wanted and unwanted, though of the latter there are, thankfully, very few. This gives me a self-appointed licence to recount the story that unfolded over an uncertain and often fraught year. My story is, despite how hard I strive for veracity, only one version of the truth, if such a thing as ‘truth’ exists. So, in fairness I have allowed each of the other six households to relate emerging events, causes and consequences as they saw it. But first I will attempt, as fairly and dispassionately as possible, to introduce my neighbours.

On entering the estate the first person you are likely to encounter is Pastor Penrose, an austere presence as befits his calling. With jet black hair and eyebrows to match, his tendency to dress in black or dark colours conveys a somewhat overpowering first impression and belies his kind and unfailingly generous nature. He occupies what is still referred to as the gatehouse. As only the residents know the entry code, he performs his role as gatekeeper of the estate with particular relish. He also enjoys joking about holding the keys to the kingdom and is untiring in his efforts to save his neighbours' souls. I do endure a very occasional visit from him, an inexhaustible fountain of such goodwill to all men that it can, at times, become quite oppressive. While he hasn't seen me at the kirk recently, he says it without accusation. On the occasion when I have endured his lengthy sermons and interminable prayers I begin to understand why his already small flock tends to diminish by the week. I admire, but am baffled by, his complete unworldliness. He does not, apparently, possess a television and I have never seen a newspaper being delivered nor, now that I come to think of it, letters or cards. Wouldn't he be an obvious recipient of Christmas or birthday cards, although I might understand a lack of conspicuous celebration of February the fourteenth. Perhaps, as I have from time to time surmised, his daunting physical appearance may not be an asset and could possibly

explain the absence of lady friends, or even men friends, although it is clear from his sermons that he is not liberally disposed to same sex relationships. He would remain a perpetual enigma at least until the events of that ominous September of 2019.

A good quarter of a mile down the drive, the first house on the left is home to the other sole resident, but not by choice, Jack Weaver. My wife, who is an artist, compares Jack to Edvard Munch, the sad eyes, salt and pepper moustache and perpetually downturned mouth. I often find him sitting with his arms folded looking at something unseen in the distance. He has still not come to terms with the death of his beloved wife Eleanor more than three years ago, despite the good pastor's assurance that she has gone to a better place. A better place than Inveresk estate, Jack would say in a lighter moment, is hard to imagine. Despite his house being literally attached to our own, our paths rarely cross except when we are favoured with a surplus of mackerel or cod.

As I understand it, and as I have been informed on those rare occasions when Jack delivers his catch, he explains once again that the most seductive of lures are lug worm and rag worm which have to be disinterred from wet sand at low tide on the Moray Firth. I have added to my intellectual repertoire the particularly seductive qualities of these rarely-seen sand dwellers, strangely celebrated by W. B. Yeats.

*But while he passed before a plashy place,  
A lug-worm with its grey and muddy mouth,  
Sang that somewhere to north or west or south,  
There dwelt a gay, exulting, gentle race,  
Under the golden or the silver skies.*

I had, on one of those impromptu visits, inquired of Jack what he thinks about when he stands for eight hours at a time looking at water. I had to press him a little further when he replied ‘nothing’ which, as a cognitive scientist, I knew to be impossible. This did give him pause for thought, offering a more considered reply – ‘fish’. My scepticism at the time has, however, been eroded by the discovery that thinking ‘fish’ is a common experience among the angling fraternity. Awaiting the smallest nibble or quiver on the line, requires heightened studied alertness, single-minded concentration and a discriminating response, since ‘fish’ covers a multitude of possibilities. It is, obviously, important to know (and feel) the difference between a twitch, a tickle, a tug and a snatch. Those less informed would simply call it a bite.

As our immediate semi-detached neighbour, Jack is the recipient on a regular basis of parcels and special deliveries intended for my wife, the world’s leading collector of paints, brushes, canvases, coloured bottles and assorted magic potions. Lauren’s obsession keeps

her occupied while I am at the university or on some mission to educate ‘non-believers’, as she puts it, gratuitously adding, “They’d be more likely to listen to you if you dressed better.” I thought this just a bit rich from someone in paint-spattered overalls and one of my old shirts. If painters had to look painterly then why shouldn’t academics look academic? What students would wish to listen to someone in a Savile Row suit, tie and matching handkerchief?

I suppose that buying her a Mina bird was as a surrogate for me while I was away on my travels. Not only a keen listener but also, unlike most of my students, able to repeat what I had just said.

It would be a serious oversight to omit Arisa from this introduction as she is the sole feline resident and an unfailing source of entertainment. An unpretentious marmalade moggy, she moved in uninvited five years ago and decided to take up residence. She has a habit of hiding behind, or sitting on top of, doors and springing out on unwary visitors. As well as causing Jack a putative ‘heart attack’, she was the recipient of a gratuitous kick when she had added some unwanted embellishment to Lauren’s latest work of art. This would prove to be a source of contention over the next few weeks, equated (by her) to the vandalism of a prized Picasso.

The house to our immediate left is occupied by the Macfarlanes. Some might describe them as the original

odd couple. Zarina, a highly distinguished lady, owner of a number of prestigious awards, is a world leading authority on developmental psychology. Bestowed with a modesty and an ironic sense of humour she had once described herself to me as “the only brown person to emerge from an unknown Indian village and end up returning there as an authentic Scottish doctor.” She carries some of the legacy of her heritage where, she explains, heavy women are preferred as role models, wives and mothers. Her hair, once jet black, as she explains, has recently been assuming ‘a distinguished shade of grey’ to befit her status.

I rarely see her as our work schedules hardly ever coincide. When I return from one of my occasional lecturing tours, I find she has just departed to Canada, the Pacific Islands or somewhere in South or North Africa, all countries of the Commonwealth. While she receives a fairly generous salary from the Commonwealth Trust she has been known to complain that most paid-for flights do not stretch beyond economy class fares. On one of those occasions when our ‘furloughs’ coincided, she took me to Raigmore Hospital to see her place of work and to visit the unit for premature infants, human beings in miniature, almost translucent, their tiny hearts visibly throbbing, determined to survive in face of the odds heavily weighted against them. Zarina is their saviour, gifted with unending patience which can take her out of

her bed, dinner or holidays at impossible hours. That apparently inexhaustible reservoir of goodwill is, however, severely tested when it comes to her dealings with her reclusive and intolerant partner, Austin. “Things change,” she says enigmatically, recalling being ‘swept off her feet’ by the tall, immaculately dressed young man who approached her after one of her lectures in order to offer congratulations on her talk while pointing out some of her grammatical errors.

“I cannot begin to explain the attraction,” she admitted, “I suppose it was his self assurance, bordering on the arrogant, that made me want to get to know him better and discover what lay behind that disingenuous exterior.”

Austin himself would not challenge such a characterisation. He agrees that his public persona can be something of a deceit. He prefers the company of world-renowned scholars to the limited human beings whom he regards, on occasion, with ill-concealed disdain. He has a habit of constantly removing and polishing his horn-rimmed glasses while considering whether the person he is indulging in conversation is actually worth the effort. His transparent lack of empathy may explain why he is rarely invited by our neighbours to ‘drop in’, and is rarely seen out and about on the estate. An invitation to admire his literary treasures is extended

to only a very few, of which I am counted as a primary beneficiary.

It does require a few hours of patient listening while we tour, as in a university library, the Chomsky shelves and the Pinker section, Austin stopping to explain his admiration for both of these luminaries who disagreed profoundly with one another. I assume he tolerates me because I am the only one willing to listen to lengthy expositions on linguistics and morphology. Perhaps it is because I am able to ask an intelligent question that I am invited to pass through a door to an antechamber in which a further thousand books wait to be indexed. It is easy to understand why my two co-habiting neighbours are unlikely to be seen together, let alone as individuals.

Back on planet earth, the Thorburns, Estelle and Matthew, live what Austin might describe as ‘mundane’ lives. They both go off to their respective jobs in the morning – Estelle to her school and Matthew to the offices of the *Inverness Courier* – both returning home in the evening, five days a week. These two sites of ‘intelligence’ are caustically described by Austin as the home of truth and the house of lies. Where there is common ground, such as articles about education, it is inevitably a source of contention. Estelle claims the ‘news’ paper (for which her husband is complicit) will also prefer the sensational to the mundane and the headline to the substance. By common agreement such

conversations are off-limits during the once-weekly restaurant visit, or on the occasional trip to the cinema or theatre.

Estelle is a head *teacher*, as she reminds me with ill-disguised irritation when I call her a head mistress. Whatever she may properly be called, the children in her care could not be more testing of patience and goodwill. They are, to use her words, ‘damaged’ children, damaged by birth, by inadequate parenting and by a society which misunderstands and stigmatises ‘needs’ that fall outside the boundaries of normality. I fear I am of little help to her and her expectations of a psychologist who knows all the theory but would never dare to stand in front of a class of disturbed and fractious children. My willingness to spend time with her is not entirely owed to the coincidence of some shared professional interests. I am reminded of W. B. Yeats famous lines, ‘*beauty to make a stranger’s eye distraught, a presence demanding of attention*’, but with a gentleness that makes me wonder how she commands the attention of her staff as well as her miscreant charges.

In a fraught moment when the negotiated truce is on hold, Estelle may be prone to accuse her partner of having an easy life as a journalist, following up on an accident or a ‘domestic’ while waiting for the big story to land. In a weak moment, Matthew might retaliate with accusations of long holidays and six-hour days,

calculated to provoke and escalate confrontation. As a couple they are exemplary of ladder theory, both on the same rung physically. Both are equally attractive, very sociable and generally liked by their neighbours, including me. Perhaps because of their demanding jobs, neither take the initiative to knock on their neighbours' doors or invite them in for a cup of tea.

The Warrens, while not the most gregarious of residents, play generous hosts to their less affluent neighbours once a year. They have only once paid us a visit, admired Lauren's works of art and commented on the 'relaxed and homely' feel, which I interpreted as 'exceptionally messy'. Their apparent reluctance to have a seat might be explained by the potential violence to their Harrods' wardrobes, his Ralph Lauren 'loungewear' and her Alexander Wang jeans which, Lauren later informed me, would have cost something north of two hundred and fifty pounds. She later commented over dinner, "You can take the girl and boy out of the west end but you can't take the west end out of our neighbours."

'Neighbours' is an ambiguous term given that they live much of the year in Abu Dhabi in what could fairly be called a mansion. I am the only Inveresk resident to have paid a visit to that bizarre Emirate, enjoying, over the course of three days, generous but mainly alcohol-free hospitality. On the one occasion, visiting the very poshest of hotels in the neighbourhood, and enjoying a

most exquisite sea food repast, I was permitted to order a glass of Malbec. I was obliged to wear a black armband to denote my heretical status and licence to imbibe. That was then. As Mr Warren informs me, Abu Dhabi has enjoyed a dramatic liberalisation in recent years. On that one memorable occasion, dinner was punctuated by serial visits to our table to see, or to be seen with, the prestigious Mr Warren. For the prestigious Mr Warren himself, life in the Emirates is a sequence of encounters with male friends, business associates and an assortment of sycophants. Dorothy, for her part, has for years, longed to permanently escape the subservient role into which she has been cast, dutiful housewife and mother of twins. As she tells it, so fraught and unrelenting is the combination of subjugation and harassment of a European woman in the Emirates that she would, from time to time, take refuge back here in the estate. Home alone, mother and daughters. Only once, in that fateful September, would Abu Dhabi have been the preferable option.

Dorothy described the twins, although going on eleven, as prone to behave more like sixteen. At least this could be said of the more adventurous Olivia, identical to her sister Emma but only in looks. The younger sister, literally by minutes, was much less prone to venture into the unknown than her gregarious, often reckless, sibling. Yet, to the unpractised eye they were peas in the same pod, freckles in similar places, emerald green eyes, dark

chestnut hair which they refused to submit to a barber. Much to their father's irritation they had given up on 'pretty frocks' in favour of jeans, preferably with patches or holes at the knees. He was even less impressed by their habit of putting their fingers in their ears when asked to do what he termed 'routine household maintenance.'

September had been, for a decade, the unique occasion when residents engaged with one another over a sustained and convivial length of time. The annual croquet ritual had, until now, been a prelude to the Warren's return to Abu Dhabi, a yearly convention, marking their escape from a Scottish winter for five months of equatorial sun. For the tenth year running the conventions were now well established so that residents knew both what to expect and what to take with them. While this was the only occasion which would bring all neighbours together, it did not preclude some informal socialising at other times, both overt and covert. Nor could it conceal the tensions that would, for a few hours, be disguised in ritualised bonhomie and an excess of alcohol.

That was then. The departure of Gerald Elder from Thornfield cottage across the road from us left a vacant house for the first time in over a decade. After the passing of Jean, his lifelong companion and 'rock', as he called her, he could no longer stay, haunted by too many

memories. The arrival of the new tenants, the Findlay family, was a foretaste of what was to come.