

Outliers – Stories from the edge of history

Season Two, Episode Thirteen

For King and Country

By Jonathan Sims

The Stranger:

Good evening gentleman. Oh, please, don't rise. No need to stand on ceremony. And don't trouble yourselves with my name.

History certainly hasn't. To be honest, history hasn't been desperately kind to any of us, has it?

So perhaps it's best for all of us that I remain a stranger.

It's a sorry place you find yourself in, is it not? Cold stone dripping from the rain and such a sombre hush upon the place.

Atmospheric, to be sure, but not desperately comfortable, I'd wager.

Of course, I'd love to speak to you directly, but in the Tower there are precautions that must be taken, I'm sure you understand, and so we must be content to talk through this grate. Well, I shall talk.

You will listen and perhaps, like so many before, you will remember the words even as you forget the speaker.

I've come to convince you to confess, to throw yourselves upon the mercy of the court martial. You're hesitant, I know, but



eventually you'll agree. I clearly have a way with words. Perhaps I appeal to your sense of duty, your love of good King George and the dishonour you might bring on yourselves and your clan. Maybe I point out that such mutinies as these over pay or conditions are not uncommon, and rarely punished with any real harshness.

No doubt the cordial treatment you've seen since you arrived at the Tower and the calm reassurance of the guards has served to ease your worries. No doubt this all was simply a misunderstanding and you might still emerge with your heads held high. Well, except for poor fevered Campbell, casting himself from the tower like that to drown in the soft, silty mud of the moat. Goodness only knows how he was able to do so, perhaps the guards were simply negligent. I wouldn't think on it too long, no-one else ever does. He's barely a footnote to a footnote, and he always was given over to dramatics, wasn't he?

Such an ignoble end for a company like the Black Watch, wouldn't you say?

The pride of Scotland, scourge of the Highland Jacobites, defending your country from the King Over the Water, lest James or Bonnie Prince Charlie return to steal it back. Except there haven't really been any Jacobites around for a good long while, have there?

None that did more than murmur, at least. The Black Watch has certainly been watching, but even those clans who keep to their secret Papistry simply haven't been giving you much to do, have they?



Your regiment was formed with promises and oaths that it would never have to leave the Highlands, that it was purely called up to defend your beloved home, but it's hard to ignore that there's been little to defend it from. Some might even have called it a waste of strong Scottish warriors.

So it's only natural when the order comes to march and present yourselves before his Majesty King George II that certain rumours start flying. You are betrayed, they have lied to you, you're going to be sent to fight in Flanders, or even all the way to the West Indies, across waters far greater than those travelled by any king. Surely not.

They had promised you. But such promises seem thinner the further South you march, don't they? And the assurances of English lords ring softer than the boom of the Flanders cannons which get closer with every step.

Whose idea was it to turn around? Who first proposed returning to Scotland? It certainly wasn't you, Shaw, or you, Malcolm.

Did you suggest such a thing, Samuel? Perhaps. I can see a hint of such defiance in you, but truth be told I don't believe any of you three "ringleaders" caused the mutiny any more than the pebble causes the avalanche. Could it even be called mutiny? Desertion?

Perhaps you argued that you were simply abiding by the agreement made with your company when it was raised that you were not to leave the Highlands, and you hoped that his Majesty would understand.

Or perhaps you knew all along, deep down, what you were doing, and decided that facing the Tower's firing squad was a



better fate than to die of disease and mud-caked violence in a land that was not your home.

Your reasons don't really matter though, do they? No more than my name. Lost to the swell and crest of history, the relentless flow that wears away all those rough edges into smooth, clean stories.

Private Farquhar Shaw, bold ringleader of the Black Watch mutiny; or a scared young man pinned as a troublemaker after getting into a fight with a Sergeant? Corporal Malcolm Macpherson, spreading rumours of betrayal and desertion; or simply standing by his cousin in advising surrender to the English forces when they finally caught up to you?

Out of you all, only Samuel Macpherson actually admits to suggesting the regiment return to Scotland, but even he denies there was any actual leader. The court martial will remember that, you know.

'Like true Highlanders', the records say, 'all denied that they had any leader'.

And surely the court martial would understand. No-one had told you anything. It was all conjecture, merely rumour. No-one knew for sure what the king's order was going to be when you arrived.

Perhaps he was simply going to dispatch you right back North again. The advice I give is to keep your complaints to yourself, to trust in your King George and let God's will be done. And you take that advice, even though in the end it doesn't save you. They shoot you for deserting your king, when the alternative was deserting your country.



For what is a king if not the bridge between our country and our God? A divinely appointed head to look down upon us and guide us in wisdom and grace. A nation incarnate, whose will and desire is that of all who dwell within it. So if he were to tell you that your best duty to Scotland lies far across the sea, to be Britain's boot on the throat of a colonised land, in the sweltering heat of Jamaica, who are you to say that is not God's will? Or would you have it that your country is your own, a thing of peasants and clansmen who live and breathe and fight without any real thought of kings?

When the Jacobites, in their secret meetings, toast to the King Over the Water, are they toasting a bitter old man rotting away in France, dreaming of second hand glories never to be inherited from a nation his father once ruled? Or are they toasting their own lost pride, the communities and beliefs that bind them, the words of a holy mass they still speak secretly together in defiance of those who would stop them? In many ways they have it so much easier, don't they, these plotting, seditious traitors?

A king in exile is simply an idea, a distant figure to be moulded and shaped to whatever form fits neatly inside a heart. We have the harder task, for the man in whom we see our statehood, the King who rules us with divine authority and in whose power we must trust and believe is a man who makes actual decisions. We do not have the luxury of imagining his desire for whatever we feel the country needs. We must instead contend with his decrees and his all-too-human choices.

It's strange to me how much trust you still have a ruler who seems to have no sort of care for you. No doubt, you say, he has been swayed by some advisor or he may simply be unaware of your situation.



If he knew your plight he would be outraged, he would do something. You just wanted to serve your country.

It's on these thought I play, of course, with my honeyed stranger's words.

Of course the king would wish the court martial to have mercy on you. And mercy is what you will receive, I say, if you keep your peace and speak no word against the officers who have treated you so poorly and break the promise to keep you a Scottish regiment. Such sweet lies I tell you, and eventually, despite it all, trust wins through and you listen to me.

The trial is brief, you plead guilty and you plead mercy, but none is forthcoming. Perhaps if you mentioned the assurances you'd been given of Highland service, or raised the complaints against your officers then it might go better for you. But you won't, and it doesn't.

You sit there waiting for my words to bear fruit, for my advice to yield clemency, but instead the word the judges speak is death.

Death for the ringleaders. Death for Macpherson, Macpherson and Shaw. The verdict is heard in silence, your stoicism and your pride not allowing any cry of protest. King George does not save you, nor does he spare a single thought for your fate.

If it's any consolation, you face the Tower's executioners with a dignity that few can muster. The Reverend Campbell notes your Christian composure and resignation of mind as you kneel before the guns. Samuel speaks words of hope to the men of the Black Watch, optimistic in securing their freedom through your unpleasant deaths and exhorting them to honour his sacred Majesty. You die with the words "king and country" on



your lips. Perhaps the conflict between the two passes through your mind just a moment before the bullet does.

I'm sorry, that was cruel of me. We're all slaves to history in the end, and the place our steps lead us is never clear when we walk them.

You can't know, of course, what happens after your execution, but it is not the liberty that you believed yourselves dying for.

The rest of the Black Watch suffers the exact fate they so dreaded: they are dissolved, your comrades scattered to a dozen other regiments in England, Flanders and, yes, even the West Indies.

They suffer and die on that foreign soil that so appals them, far from the fair winds of Scotland.

Of course there's every chance this is what His Majesty had always intended for them and your deaths made no difference at all, but it is seen by many as further punishment for their mutiny and that, far from saving the Black Watch, your confession gave the means for its destruction. There are many who call it a betrayal. Of you, of your comrades, and of Scotland.

And do you know the funniest thing? For almost twenty years the Watch has stood vigilant against the Jacobites, you stalwart lads of loyal clans prepared to quash another rising with speed and ferocity. But thirty years after the rebellion of 1715, do you know what ultimately helps rally their treasonous cause and convinces many of the clans to stand with them for another doomed revolt?

The crown's betrayal of the Black Watch. The executions of Macpherson, Macpherson and Shaw and the dissolution of the regiment.



Such an act could come from no rightful king who truly respected Scotland, and many join the Jacobites in a perverse protest over the betrayal of those who would oppress them.

Your deaths for king and country help to strike a wound between the two that will never fully heal. The holy authority of a British king becomes the cruel yolk of the English crown.

It won't stop there, either, I'm afraid. It never does when we become part of a story larger than ourselves. The Forty-Five rebellion is too successful for the comfort of the throne and, though scuppered by scheming English Tories, it is of course the Scots who bear the cost. And the steps they the English take to finally destroy the clans render your beloved home a different land within a generation. Is this your fault? Is it mine? What weight of history can be put on the testimony of two ill-fated corporals and a private? How much on the advice of a stranger?

For who can truly account for the course of even our own small stories, let alone the fate of nations? A failed rising, a bloody battle, a heroic stand, such things History is made of. A thousand threads converging into a grand change. But perhaps some threads are deeper buried than other, and perhaps for just one moment a nation's destiny rested on the advice of an unnamed stranger to trio of doomed men who chose their king over their country. Good night, gentlemen. Sleep well, and dream of Scotland.

