

FIRST UP

5 THINGS WE HAVE LEARNED THIS WEEK



BRIDGE TOO FAR

Could someone send Boris Johnson a map, please? His plan for a bridge from the Mull of

Kintyre or Portpatrick to Northern Ireland has, it's fair to say, divided opinion. Does he realise that, according to the AA, to travel from Kintyre to Glasgow would take more than three hours? Still, maybe the various republican and loyalist marchers who clog up city streets could march back and forth across it to their hearts content.

BEAST FROM EAST

Weather forecasters are warning Scots that the worst winter in decades is on its way as the Beast from the East is poised to return. We'd be more impressed if they could get the prediction right for this weekend, rather than trying to guess what the weather is going to be doing in four months.

LIE BACK

It's never good being caught lying to your boss, is it? But it's even worse when your boss is the Queen, as Boris Johnson found out this week. Off with his head, ma'am.

HERALD HEADLINES

Unaccustomed as we are to appearing on the telly, Herald staffers report being disappointed that they couldn't claim haircuts and new clothes on expenses before the filming of The Papers. The first episode of The Herald documentary is on BBC1 this Wednesday. PS: Sorry about the messy office.

UNEARTHLY EAWORM

Scientists have discovered a distant planet, romantically dubbed K2-18b, which has warmth and water. Now we can't get Bowie's Life on Mars out of our head.

GARRY SCOTT



PICTURE: COLIN MEARNIS

What it feels like to ...

SWAP MEDICINE FOR CRIME

ANNE PETTIGREW

BEING a sickly child, I spent a lot of time in the company of doctors, so it was probably not surprising that I became one. The white coat and wise aura attracted me, but I think it was the stethoscope and big desk that swung it. I also spent a lot of childhood hours in the company of books. Smog blighted Glasgow in the late-1950s. It exacerbated my asthma so I was often kept at home devouring Blyton, Verney, Brent-Dyer, my father's R.L. Stevenson, Compton Mackenzie, Rider Haggard and Wodehouse, soaking up history, humour and notions of foreign and lost worlds.

At Queen's Park Secondary School my English teacher tried dissuading me from medicine. Teaching, he advised, was good for girls: "Home in time to cook your husband's tea."

I loved medicine, never dull, providing lifelong friendships cemented

during long nights watching one another's backs while responsible for life and death. Terrifying.

Finding hospital medicine offered no provision for part-time work and biological clock ticking, I headed for General Practice and spent 31 years easing patients through illness, bereavements and births.

I mourn the disappearance of continuity of care. With GP shortages you're lucky to see any family doctor now, never mind one who's known you since childhood. Such knowledge definitely saved time (and money) by allowing swifter diagnosis and reduced referrals.

I still miss patients, still get odd hugs in Tesco, but don't miss the soul-destroying collection of health data never utilised (as far as I could see) by Health Boards.

It was battling for patients that started me writing. In 1989, incensed

at Maggie Thatcher's bonkers NHS plans, I wrote an exasperated letter to The Herald which published it as an article and engaged me for a regular column. Thereafter I had a parallel journalism career in the medical and lay press, venting spleen on the vagaries of patients, the state of the NHS, and the inability of politicians to grasp its mechanics.

Becoming disillusioned by my failure to convince patients to change unhealthy lifestyles, at 52, I set off to a sabbatical Medical Anthropology Masters at Oxford. My report to the Scottish Office concluded the best way to improve mortality rates – and economic growth – is female education.

The crime-writing came after retirement. Not fancying slippers and reckoning you're a long time dead, I decided to write a novel about women doctors, absent in literature unless as pioneers or pathologists. University of

Glasgow creative writing classes were a revelation. My tale morphed from a historical depiction of life for female 1960s' Glasgow medical students into a darkly humorous romp with disastrous relationships and disappearing bodies, nicknamed in class Sex and Scalpels.

Finally called Not The Life Imagined, it was runner-up in the SAW Constable Silver Stag Award 2018 and published by Ringwood who've submitted it for a Saltire award. It's been stressful coping with social media promotion but I'm thrilled to be chosen as a Spotlight Author at Bloody Scotland appearing alongside Prof Angela Gallop and her authoritative book on forensic science. At 69 it's nice to be up and coming...

Not The Life Imagined is available from Ringwood, Amazon and Waterstones. Anne Pettigrew and Professor Gallop are at Bloody Scotland, Stirling, on September 22 at 11am. Visit bloodyscotland.com

FIDELMA COOK

What did you do in the Great Porogue, Grandma?

A FAIRY tale of Old Balignac. 'Grandma? What did you do in the Great Porogue?' My heart sank. I'd always known this day would come, and the fixed blue-eyed stare of the girl in front of me warned me she would take no evasions.

There was almost a relief in knowing that it finally had. 'Come sit beside me, pour me another glass and I'll tell you.' The child obeyed; no look of censure, no disapproving moue like her father.

'What has daddy told you,' I asked carefully, grasping the glass with hands that had grown shakier in the intervening years of coup and counter coup. I had to watch what I was saying, for this was the first time she'd been granted a pass out of London. I hoped it wouldn't be the last, but...

After a long examination of her travel papers and the letters of recommendations written by old friends in the new Government, the French had let her through. The Irish heritage attestation helped enormously even though the blood was now too diluted for any hope of an EU passport. Any loophole had long been closed.

With no words of that mellifluous language – all foreign language teaching had been banned for a good few years now – she could only smile her thanks.

'Daddy never really talks about it,' she replied, equally carefully, avoiding my eyes this time.

'He's never forgiven you, of course, for not returning. He just said he had no problems with me meeting you but not to take everything you said as 100 per cent truth.'

'He said it would be the truth but your truth.'

Well, isn't truth always subjective? We gazed out at the Parc – as well tended as it always had been, to countryside as empty as it always had been. No Afghan Hound ran through it now; those days were gone. The ghosts remained however and delighted me – Portia, César – lost in memory. There was no longer – to her dismay – a swimming pool. That had

given up the ghost the same month as the Great Porogue began; disgorging its contents with little regard for the damage. A Brexit metaphor I thought at the time. I took a deep breath and began....

'It was a day very much like today. I'd checked the computer was in order by reading all the UK papers online as I always did.'

I registered her surprise. 'Oh yes, we could access your country then with no problem; even watch your TV programmes. Until we were blocked after the second revolution.'

'Tell me, is EastEnders still running?'

Her baffled face gave me the answer as she leaned forward eager to hear of such times that were barely covered in the revision of the revision of the revised History curriculum.

'We could even watch a live feed from the Palace of Westminster.'

Her hand flew to her mouth at such a dangerous thought. All dealings, all decisions, were now completely secret until limited pronouncements were made via the country's only paper, the Daily Telegraph.

'But if people could listen and watch,' she said, torn at the thought. 'They might protest. They might take to the streets like, like....'

I finished her sentence: 'Like in the months leading up to the Great Porogue.'

Her eyes gleamed at the thought of such wild times and I could see the spark of resistance that they hadn't yet fully eradicated from the children trapped on that insular island.

'I wasn't the only one

watching that afternoon and night, you know,' I told her. 'Many of us were, even as the hours stretched on and on.'

Johnson had been to Dublin that morning and it was plain he was unravelling even then.

'He was like a small child fidgeting in the presence of the adults.'

Again, she stopped me. 'Johnson? Boris Johnson? I've seen photographs. Was he related to Cameron and May?'

I sighed. 'In a way, yes. He was infected.'

'I watched as Johnson lost vote after vote but by then he knew he had the Prorogation.'

'People shouted, people sang – the Scots were defiant to the last and he and his henchmen never returned to the Chamber after... after the shameful words of closure.'

I paused visualising that scene over and over again – seeing the defiant, contemptuous face of the Speaker who had defended Parliament's honour to his own cost.

'Oh, there were good men and women in his own party too,' I reassured her. 'But most at heart still wanted to follow the will of the people.'

'Grandma – that's too far now,' she almost shouted, laying a hand on my wrinkled arm.

'The will of the people is paramount. It's what makes us. It's what keeps us safe and cared for.'

I was growing tired and she could see it. Almost whispering she asked: 'And the Scots, Grandma. Tell me about the Scots.'

'Tomorrow,' I wearily replied. 'I promise. It's too much for today.'

A flicker of pity flitted over her face. 'OK, Grandma, but please, one last question now.'

'What did you do in the Great Porogue?'

Only the truth would do. 'I tweeted, darling. I tweeted.'

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