

Talk by Dorothy Dunnett in Melbourne, Australia, 9 March 2000

I attended DD's talk last night in Melbourne - here's a report from my scribbles. I believe Karen Stone recorded it and will send Elaine or Judy a transcript as well.

It was held in the dining-room of a motel/conference-centre in Frankston, 1970's dark-brick and leadlight-glass decor, pleasant surroundings, tables of 2-6 people, mostly unknown to each other. Frequently overheard comment - "I've never actually met another person in real life who reads her!" At a rough count there were around 70 people there, all ages, some surprisingly young, the majority women.

After the first course Dorothy spoke. She said that unlike other authors promoting their work, she would be trying not to speak about her latest book, as her publisher would have her throat cut. She mentioned that Gemini was 728 pages long, that her husband had been a member of the Dunnett Non-Readers group, and his approach was just to say "dash it - she's going to disappear again," whenever she started a new book.

She said she would do a reading of the rooftop race from Queen's Play. She introduced it by talking about pronunciation - she said some people think the name is pronounced Lee-mond, but it's not, it's Lie-mond, and she was firm about that. She said he was "hard, self-possessed, no feeling for home or country, a mercenary." In the first book he was an outlaw who redeems himself, who is reconciled with his mother and brother, but that doesn't last long (said with relish).

In Queen's Play, which is "ostensibly about him protecting the life of the young Queen Mary", he is disguised, uses his charm to pander to the French court. He becomes wayward like them, then receives a shock which brings him back to his senses.

[She coughed, took a drink of water then and said matter-of-factly, "I always get a lump in my throat when talking about Lymond."]

The extract shows he is not as irresponsible as he seems. The court is staying at Blois and Thady Boy suggests a rooftop race. (She pronounced it the Irish way, T'ady Boy, not Thady.) Lymond has chosen to befriend Robin Stewart, "an awkward, difficult man". He asks Robin to run with him. Stewart has few friends, he is grudgingly attracted to Lymond, is persuaded. The race begins. [She said something I missed about how there should be a tourist map of the race, or perhaps there is.]

She then read extracts from Chapter 5, starting "Few of those running ever finished the course" to "Strong, confident and free, for one evening envious of no man, Robin Stewart followed his leader up and into the belfry."

This was followed by audience questions:

- Someone asked, was the race an annual event? No, she invented it, Thady Boy was testing the archer, each had their lives on the line.

- I asked - on a different topic, did Simon set the Charety fire? She laughed and said, "I'm finding my way through the possible answers here. No, not Simon..." Then she quickly pointed at another person as I said, But did he get someone else to do it? and she laughed again. Damn, I realised too late *that* was what I should have asked!

- Someone asked, did she consult a lot of works for the astrological background? She said no, just some standard works, but that she had to do a lot more on the background for the divination.

- Someone asked about the pronunciation of Gelis. She said - Egidia is commonly abbreviated to Gelis throughout Europe with various pronunciations, but that she thought of it as Jee-lis (rather than Jelis).

- Inaudible question: she replied - Phillipa and Lymond are standard romantic hero and heroine characters. Nicholas and Gelis are not so easily identifiable as hero and heroine. She then said something about a lot of children nowadays are named Nicholas (but I missed the sense of the comment).

- Question about books being published in large print - yes, and recorded versions too, though she was very unsure about how the readers should pronounce the Flemish words.

- Question about genesis of books - born complete or bit by bit? She said her husband had been an editor, and you have to do what an editor tells you. He said to write a series. She wanted to write about a period not previously gone over by historians. She thought up a single long story over 3 volumes (yes, 3...) and worked out "every single movement".

She did the same thing with Nicholas. She wanted to write someone who wasn't a typical romantic hero and to see if "people would love him anyway". [Somehow from the tone of her voice I felt a touch of hope

that he wouldn't get killed off in Gemini.]

She said that when she started writing, there were all the new young people making fortunes on the stockmarket. She set it in the 15th century, she loved the Renaissance period - merchants, explorers, bankers with a flair for mathematics. She had to work out the Nicholas story over 8 books.

Her writing career had spanned 40 years, and a lot of her records had come to bits - blurry ballpoint pen, papers sellotaped up, faxes that had gone completely blank. And history changes. She'd had 20 history journal subscriptions. But so far - so far - she said, nothing awful has been discovered to change the story, and now that it's finished "they can do what they like!"

Question - Macbeth - had her ideas changed? Definite no! Her publishers had wanted her to do Bonnie Prince Charlie or Mary Queen of Scots or Macbeth for her next book (then) and she'd thought, not on your life! But then thought, Shakespeare's version wasn't history. She'd looked up what there was on the real Macbeth. he'd ruled for 17 years and very little was known about his wife. No-one in history departments had done any work on him in over 100 years, there were about 20 known facts.

Then she started to think there was a chance he was someone else, which was "not what you want!" Started to see parallels between Macbeth and Thorfinn's life, same events like Rome visit at the same time, but neither is mentioned in reports of the other. "Macbeth" was a popular baptismal name for pagans. It was possible they were the same man.

Her husband asked, how much longer? after 3 years of research, 5 years of writing. Historians were divided, half thought it was a ludicrous theory, half thought it was real, but it's not yet decided. For what it's worth, the Historian Royal of Scotland [?] believes it.

Question about travel: she sometimes had to try to keep out of prison - she was almost arrested in Turkey at the seraglio, staring at the jewellery and costumes. Someone must have thought she was going to steal them because she found herself surrounded by "tall gents", guards who later showed her all over the seraglio, about 300 rooms.

Another story: in Iceland, there'd been a Cod War in the 15th century, ships would fight, not just politics. To Catholic Europe, fish was important. She wanted to go to the geysers, no-one would take her. She found a taxi-driver - "I am the brave one" - who led her onto the geyser field, showed her the markers, said that there was a geyser every 8 minutes, then went back to the cab. She was standing with her camera as a whiteout, a snow-gale, started. She could see nothing. She stood there for a long time, it would clear, then whiteout again. Finally she got her photos, went back to the cab. They started along the road and were terrifyingly blown off into mud by the gale. Finally they were towed into town by another van. Her knees were shaking, she hugged and kissed the taxi-driver with relief when they got there, to the amazement of a crowd of American tourists. The taxi-driver took her everywhere, and when she was leaving, again to the amazement of the Americans, she took him up to her suite to give him a bottle of Highland Park Whisky (the suite, not the bedroom, she joked).

She stopped there for the main course of the meal, then after that she was available for book signing. She spoke with everyone during the signing, personally and with enthusiasm, even though it was late and she must have been tired.

I didn't have books with me but told her she'd signed two of them already because I got them from James Thin when they first came out, and I just wanted to thank her for them. She seemed pleased, then I told her I was on dunnetwork, and she said, "Dunnetwork! They won't let me on there!" with mock indignation. She said there was a fear it would affect how her stories developed if she knew what people were arguing about. "Perhaps when I've finished they'll let me on," she joked.

She is so animated and pretty in real life, more so than recent publicity photos had indicated - the one on the James Thin site is very unflattering (Bill Marshall, please note :-). She calmly talked about her husband Alistair several times, during her talk and also while chatting to people in the book-signing queue.

Trivia - she was wearing a navy coat with a soft, shirt-like cut to it, and a long gold chain with a white and gold enamel (?) unicorn on it.

What a lovely night.

Kate Lance in Melbourne