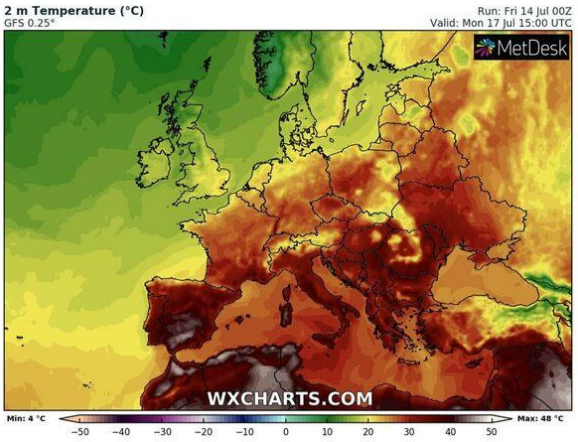
Alba

I couldn't believe it.

Minutes away from boarding my flight from Santa Fe to Dallas in late August, an airport employee announced on the public address system, sounding like the voice of God in the tiny and packed departure lounge, that the plane was experiencing a software issue and would be delayed. My prayers had failed. I leaned wearily against a wall as a flashback from my disastrous outbound trip to Copenhagen two months earlier flooded in: a canceled flight, two delayed ones, seven hours in crazily crowded Heathrow airport, a midnight arrival in the Danish capital, lost luggage, and a long wait for a train downtown that netted me a 3am arrival at my hotel. Although my destination was different this time – Edinburgh – the two stopovers were the same. I had tempted the travel gods with my repeated itinerary, I knew, and now they were sniggering. Fortunately, after thirty minutes they relented, and I boarded the plane in time to make the connection in Dallas. I shifted my prayers to Heathrow. It wasn't simply a matter of being inconvenienced; there was a far more important reason I didn't want to be delayed.

I would be meeting my children.

For a while, I wasn't sure there would even be a trip to Scotland. During the summer, the world erupted in heat and fire – when it wasn't being drowned in biblical rain storms and flooding. In fact, 2023 may enter the record books as the year climate change officially began to bite *hard*. Over a stretch of four days – July 3rd to 6th – the global average temperature became the hottest in recorded history, topping out at an unprecedented 17.23°C (63.02°F) on July 6th – a full degree more than the same date in 2022. The news wasn't anomalous, unfortunately. For the ninth year in a row, the planet had just endured its warmest June on record. Deadly heat waves had struck China, Mexico, India, and Texas where the heat index (humidity + temperature) reached a brutal 107 degrees F. Winter sea ice near Antarctica fell to record lows, while sea surface temperatures in the North Atlantic were 1.6 C warmer than average, breaking records by wide margins. In southern Europe, two intense heat waves were given names from Greek mythology connected with the Underworld – *Cerberus* and *Charon*.



The Charon Heat Wave

July beat June as the planet's hottest month. August brought more of the same. Canada's six thousand wildfires continued to rage and would ultimately consume forty-five million acres, beating the previous record by *thirty million acres*. On Maui, a fast-moving wildlife nearly wiped out the historic town of Lahaina, killing a hundred people and destroying two thousand buildings. A massive heat dome in the central and southern U.S. – one of a series – put 143 million Americans under Extreme Heat alerts. The heat index in Lawrence, Kansas, hit 134 degrees on August 20th. Phoenix, my hometown, endured a hellish summer of relentless heat with fifty-four days above 110 degrees, shattering long-standing records. Torrential rains devastated parts of India, Slovenia, Greece, Mexico, South Korea, and Norway. In early September, researchers declared the summer of 2023 to be the hottest in 174 years of record-keeping. They said half of the world's population experienced higher than normal temperatures as a result of climate change. While some of the heat could be linked to the onset of a weather phenomenon called *El Niño*, scientists said the severity of climate impacts were accelerating on their own. They also said the summer of 2023 would likely the coolest one for the rest of our lives.

Waiting impatiently in the Santa Fe airport, I didn't want to think about climate change. I just wanted to see my kids. Fortunately, the travel gods smiled on me for the rest of the outbound trip – or were distracted. I'll take distracted. It was similar for Olivia and Sterling, who enjoyed smooth journeys to Edinburgh. I found Olivia in an airport café and joined her for a much anticipated cappuccino. Sterling arrived two hours later. We gave each other a huge three-way hug. It was so good to see their smiles again! We didn't spend nearly enough time together, especially on trips, a family specialty. Olivia lived in western Massachusetts where she stayed after graduating from Mt. Holyoke College in 2021. Sterling remained in Portland, Oregon, after graduating from Reed College the same year (they're twins). They came home to Santa Fe during the Covid pandemic, but now they were settled into their lives, far away. But here we were traveling together again, warming my heart!

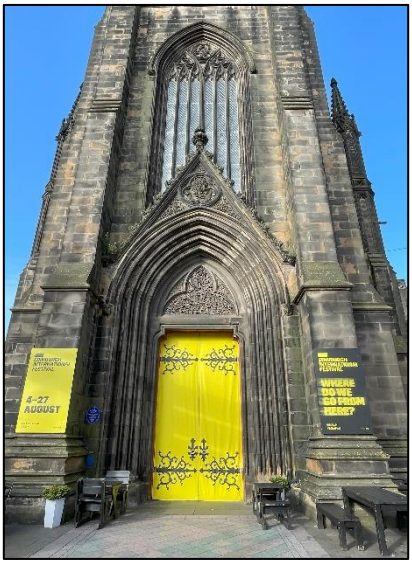
Olivia and Sterling in Edinburgh

It was going to be a great trip, I just knew it.

We took the tram downtown under sunny skies. I had been watching the weather forecasts like a hawk every day, worried that our two-week sojourn together would be marred by Scotland's

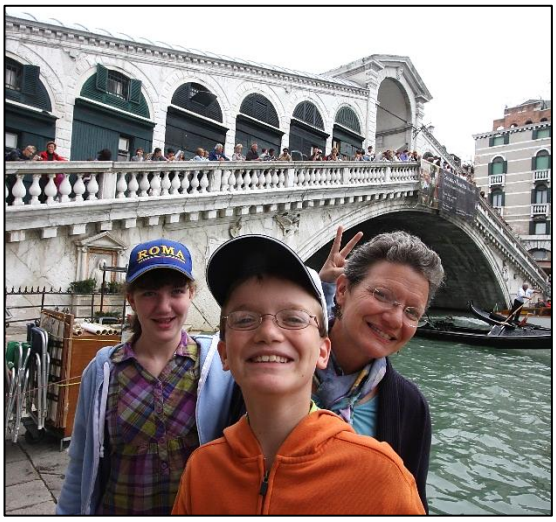
famously wet weather. To my relief, at the last moment a sun symbol replaced rain clouds in the forecast. We walked from the tram station to the Old Waverly Hotel, located on a busy boulevard at the edge of New Town. They gave us a room on the top floor with a dramatic view of medieval Old Town a short distance to the south. The tiny room was packed with twin beds, reminding me of a similarly cramped hotel room in Barcelona the four of us shared, years ago. In the street, a musician played bagpipes. Edinburgh! We set out immediately. Crossing over the railroad tracks, we climbed steep and curvy Cockburn Street. It was full-on classic Europe, with lovely buildings, boutique shops, and tempting eateries with tables outside. I detected a theme to the shops right away: coffee, whiskey, and scarves. I would be a disappointing tourist for the locals. I didn't drink whiskey or need a scarf. Coffee, yes. Lots of coffee. For everything else that wasn't food, beer, or admission fees, no. Sterling and Olivia felt the same way, though Sterling was intrigued by the idea of trying a glass or two of whiskey. He certainly had plenty of choices!

Hitting High Street, we turned right and strolled toward Edinburgh Castle, weaving around knots of people. This was the famous Royal Mile, which stretches along a ridge between the Castle and royal Holyrood Palace to the east. My guidebook said it was one Europe's must-sees despite the crowds. Actually, the tourist congestion wasn't bad. I had booked us to arrive on the final day of the Edinburgh International Festival, a popular month-long revel of theatre and music. It included a 'fringe' festival of more daring shows, whose adverts were plastered on every pole and wall. The plan had been to witness the massive fireworks show over Edinburgh Castle that traditionally closes the Festival, but it had been cancelled, alas. Maybe thinner crowds was our bonus.



Festival headquarters

As we walked past the Festival headquarters in an old church, the event's motto caught my eye: *Where Do We Go From Here*? I did a quick search. It was borrowed from Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s last book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Apparently, it was King's message of hope to the world. Festival Director Nicola Benedetti explained: "I am moved by the power and urgency of [King's] mission…in the face of brutality, irrational hatred, and closed-minded certitude. Under unimaginable and constant pressure, he never stopped believing in people's capacity to unite and elevate around an exalted purpose." What a cool theme for an arts festival!



At the Rialto Bridge in Venice (2010)

We widened our rambling beyond the Royal Mile. We chatted and laughed as we walked, falling easily into our comfortable and intimate travel mode, honed over many trips made together as a family. This one was a consolation for me. Originally, I had planned to come to Scotland with Gen. Our goal was to hike the length of Hadrian's Wall, a famous stony relic from the Roman Empire. As an archaeologist, it had been on Gen's 'Must See' list for a long time. Mine too. After an energizing trip to Prague and Berlin to see Olivia during the summer of 2019, amidst financial and medical stresses, we decided to take the plunge. Our plan was to fly to Edinburgh, rent a car, drive to England, hike the 70-mile Wall trail – where we would celebrate my 60th birthday – then make a looping drive around Scotland back to the capital. I had a feeling it would be a special trip, so I spent many hours working out the logistics. Finally, everything was in place. It was February 2020. You know what happened next. Covid. Trip cancelled. That was hard but I kept things in perspective. Gen's cancer meant she was part of the at-risk population, so we decided to keep a low profile. I shelved our Scotland plans for post-pandemic. Very sadly we never went. In 2021, Gen endured heart surgery as part of her cancer treatment. It was supposed to add years to her life. However, the cancer suddenly began spreading rapidly, reinfecting her heart. After her memorial, Sterling suggested we go to Scotland and visit Hadrian's Wall for her. I thought it was a great idea. We decided to go.

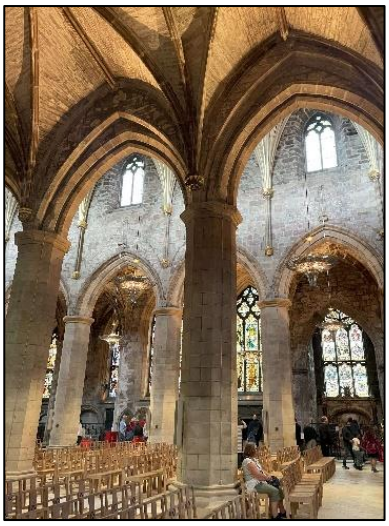
After catch-up naps back at the hotel, we headed out for our first supper in Scotland – at an Italian restaurant. We fell to gabbing right away. Sterling, the older twin by six minutes (as he keeps reminding his sister), is as garrulous as Olivia is quiet. Both benefitted massively from the two years they spent as actors in a youth Shakespeare troupe in Santa Fe, performing in multiple plays including the leads in two separate casts of *Hamlet* (see my essay Will). The experience gave Sterling the self-assurance to become the charming, well-spoken person he is today (he had always been talkative as a child). For Olivia, acting went a long way to helping her overcome a deep shyness and boost her self-confidence, though she still struggles to get a word in when her brother is around. We were a tight family growing up, and the kids developed a close bond that is still strong today despite the distance that separates them, also warming my heart.

Early next morning, we kept our appointment at Edinburgh Castle, located on a volcanic rock with a commanding view of the city, literally. During its 1000-year history, Edinburgh Castle was attacked twenty-six times, earning the honor of being the most besieged castle in Great Britain. It played a prominent role in the Wars of Scottish Independence in the 14th century, switching hands between English and Scottish armies numerous times. A devastating twelve-day siege in 1573 by an English army, which fired three thousand cannon balls at the Castle, reduced most of the medieval structures to rubble. Sieges in the 1640s, followed by extensive rebuilding, created the Castle we see today. I thought it was rather dull. It had tremendous views of the city, but there wasn't much of interest inside, including an uninspiring Great Hall. The exception was tiny, humble St. Margaret's Chapel, the oldest surviving building in Edinburgh. It was built by King David I in the early 12th century to honor his pious mother, Margaret, an English princess who fled to Scotland with her brother in the wake of William the Conqueror's victory at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 (her brother was heir to the English throne). She married King Malcom III and had eight children. Three sons became King of Scotland, including David I, the youngest, who reigned for thirty years (1124-1153). A daughter married King Henry I of England, becoming Queen. Following a stream of fellow tourists, I entered the cramped chapel for a look. It was more than curiosity. King David was a direct ancestor of mine. It was another reason I wanted to visit Scotland.

Historical relics at the Castle

It was part of the Sagalands.

Exiting the castle, we set out on the Royal Mile for Holyrood Palace. On the way, we took a detour into St. Giles Cathedral. I am not a huge fan of ecclesiastical architecture (churches tend to blur together in my mind), but this one was pretty – and nine hundred years old. It was also built by King David I, part of his highly consequential run as Scotland's monarch. Apparently, David and his siblings spent part of their youth at the English court, which may explain how his sister Margaret caught the roving eye of young Henry I (who would sire at least twenty illegitimate children). Their royal marriage made David brother-in-law to the King of England, a useful connection, and caused him to adopt Norman ways, becoming "civilized."



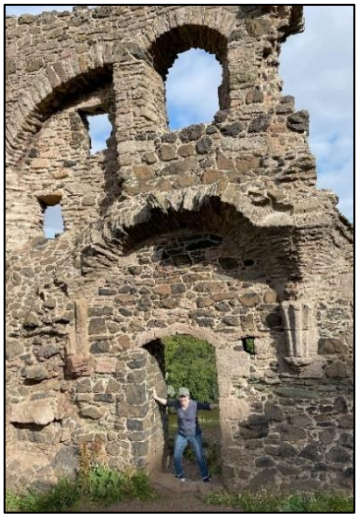
St. Giles Cathedral

A contemporary historian of the era, William of Malmesbury, wrote that David I "rubbed off all tarnish of Scottish barbarity through being polished by intercourse and friendship with us." David went on to implement important reforms to Scotland during his reign, including the introduction of Norman-style feudalism and knighthood, the founding of monasteries and regional markets, the adoption of Norman architecture, and the strengthening of royal authority. Scholars call what happened the 'Davidian Revolution' and credit it with modernizing Scotland – in a medieval sense. David was a member of the royal House of Dunkeld, named for his ambitious grandfather King Duncan I, who reigned from 1034 to 1040 before being killed by Macbeth – yes, *that Macbeth*! Shakespeare, by the way, got almost all of it wrong. For my purposes, it is David I's son, Henry, that matters. Through Henry Dunkeld's marriage to Ada de Warenne – supposedly a love-match – and a subsequent child, Henry linked together two important branches of my *de Lacy* family watershed, Warenne and Bohun, thus becoming part of my family saga. I'll call it *Dunkeld Creek*. It arose obscurely in misty headwaters among highland mountains and valleys in a land called…

Alba. The ancient name for Scotland.

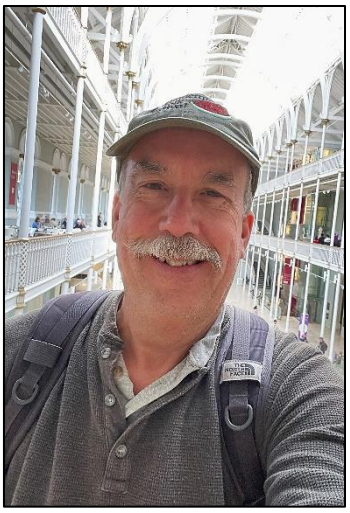
Sterling skipped out on us in the evening. He had two college chums in town, Jack, who had studied viking history at a Scottish university up north, and Ethan, who was studying Welsh history in Wales. Ethan brought his girlfriend, also a student. They all went out drinking. Olivia and I found a historic pub along the Royal Mile and slipped into a corner booth for supper. I love pubs. I love the noise, the laughter, the dark wood, the chummy proximity of fellow pub-goers, the beer, of course, and even the food. According to the author of my guidebook, pub grub had improved considerably in recent years, though it still had a ways to go. I didn't mind. As long as there was sticky toffee pudding! It was wonderful have Olivia to myself for a moment. She was an English major in college and would like to become a writer but is unclear on next steps. She's apprehensive about the financial debt that graduate school would involve. She's also worried about where things are going, particularly in the United States. Recent, awful Supreme Court decisions combined with cultural backsliding on a number of key social issues have soured her somewhat on America. She's sweetest person I know, so that says a lot. I've tried to reassure her as best as I can, but it's got to be tough for young people. When I was her age – 25 in 1985 – prospects felt bright, or at least well-defined. Now, they're incredibly complex. Olivia's response is to burrow. Focus on her group of close friends, her job at an organic bakery, ignore social media, and save her pennies. Sounds like a plan. I bought the meal and gave her a big hug.

The next day, we went for a hike. The target was Arthur's Seat, another volcanic plug, though one without a mighty castle on its summit. Instead, it was besieged by day hikers. The well-worn path started near the Scottish Parliament building, a modernist oddity that contrasted sharply with the stately Holyrood Palace across the street, perhaps deliberately. It stirred up quite a controversy when it opened in 2004, possibly because it is so ugly. I've never understood modernism, especially in architecture. Alienation isn't my thing. I prefer human-scaled, lived-in, harmonious buildings. Take our first stop on the hike, a ruined medieval chapel with a forty-foot tower. Located on a small outcropping with a great view, it had all the right stuff. After summiting Arthur's Seat in a stiff breeze, we headed back down the trail and back up the Royal Mile. We skipped the Palace, maintaining my refusal to sightsee the historic excesses of royalty, though it meant missing the ruins of Holyrood Abbey, founded in 1128 by – you guessed it – King David I. Thrown from his horse and nearly gored by a charging stag, David claimed he was saved by the appearance of the Holy Cross (*Rood*) in the sky. He founded the abbey in gratitude.



Olivia holding up the chapel

I wanted to have lunch outside, so we picked a hip eatery near Edinburgh Castle. It took me a moment to realize the restaurant didn't have waiters. Scan your order and wait for a robot to bring the meal. That's what it felt like. More digital dehumanization, I complained to the kids. They agreed. When they were young, Gen and I refused to give them access to electronics until they learned to read. They didn't get cell phones until they were fourteen. It meant they were late to the digital revolution, but it also meant they grew up among analog things, such as being outside and interacting with human beings face-to-face. Both said they were grateful. After lunch, we went to the National Museum of Scotland, where the issue of progress came up again. After visiting the early Scotland history rooms, I found myself unexpectedly in the middle of the Industrial Revolution. It was a period brimming with Scottish scientists, engineers, inventors, poets, philosophers, and novelists. It was also a time of darkness, greed, and cruelty, as Charles Dickens taught us. The museum artfully dodged the ugly stuff, which was fine. I was tired of revolutions, so I stepped into the Great Hall for a selfie instead.



Selfie with museum

As I waited for the kids to emerge from the depths of the museum, the arts festival theme came back to mind. *Where Do We Go From Here?* The short answer: back to the hotel for a nap! The longer answer is harder. *Chaos or Community?* It was a great question in 1967 that's become more urgent today given fast-moving events, particularly on the climate front. My heart ached for the kids. In high school, Sterling was selected to attend Boys State, where he got all fired up about politics and policy. He spent six weeks one hot summer in Washington, D.C., as an intern for New Mexico's Senator Tom Udall (D). At Reed, he studied political science and environmental policy, including western water law. For his Senior thesis, he analyzed climate policy during the Obama Administration. Next up was law school, he said. After graduation, he worked in a Portland law office that specialized in patents and trademarks. He didn't like it. His favorite class at Reed involved trees – actual trees – so he applied for a job in the Urban Forestry department at the City of Portland. He got it. He loves the work and is content. He's not as fired up about politics and prefers not to discuss news or trouble ahead. Olivia feels the same way. Both of them would rather focus on Community – their friends, their jobs, their interests – right now, not Chaos. I totally get it. I tilted at windmills for most of my adult life. No regrets. But I feel at a loss for advice. Things are more chaotic today than at any point in my life and the need for community has never been greater, but I'm not sure how to get there in this unreal digital universe that we've created.

Sterling heading to D.C.

Sterling's friend Jack joined us for supper at a pub in Grassmarket Square, formerly the place to go to buy a cow or watch a public hanging. Over beers, we agreed that Edinburgh was a great city, prompting Olivia to say she'd consider moving here if things continued to go south in America. Jack backed her up, though he tossed in a word of caution about long Scottish winters. The conversation moved on to friends, school tales, and shared interests. I felt self-consciously the elder at the table. I kept quiet mostly, until the subject turned to viking history, which Jack had studied for a master's degree. I went full Rollo: Scandinavia, Normandy, England, the Siege of Paris in 875 AD, slavery, booty, assimilation. Jack gave me a wonderful look: *who is this old guy*? I smiled and returned to my beer. After a while, I closed my eyes, feeling the effects of the alcohol. I listened to the happy buzz of the pub, whose patrons seemed close to Sterling and Olivia's age. It was a university town as well as an artistic mecca for young people, which added to Edinburgh's

appeal for Olivia. My thoughts drifted back to my life after graduate school in Los Angeles, when Gen and I were young. A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away. I opened my eyes, feeling sad. Gen. Listening to the youthful, boisterous sounds all around me, I missed my generational buddy. I wanted to hear her laugh and get her thoughts. Be a family again, traveling together. I finished my beer. Life is a journey. Some parts you can control, many you cannot. You work hard to create community and pray the chaos is manageable. There's joy and sadness. Hopefully, the balance is ultimately tipped in favor of joy by whatever forces are in charge of our lives: genes, upbringing, plans, choices, whims of deities, laws of physics. If not, we do the best we can. Have a beer. Laugh. Remember.

And keep going.

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We made it to Bamburgh Castle alive. Actually, the drive wasn't so bad. After booking the trip, I began to feel anxious about the novelty of driving on the wrong side of the road, compounded by a choice: standard or automatic? In Europe, I always rent a stick-shift, which I love to drive. They are also cheaper. But the shifting would be left-handed this time. Online, I was relieved to find this advice: skip the extra stress, go automatic. So, I did. Everything went smoothly, though there were a few hair-raising moments in the roundabouts. Sterling and Olivia took turns being the digital navigator, which helped a lot. "Take the third exit on the next roundabout," one would cheerfully instruct. If I fumbled it, we just went around again! Traffic was heavy and the roads narrow, including the A1 highway – a major artery known as the Great North Road – which we hopped on. I immediately missed the wide, speedy Interstates of the U.S. We reached Bamburgh Castle in the late afternoon. It's an icon of sorts for us, having been a part of *The Last Kingdom*, a viking-themed TV series that we watched and thoroughly enjoyed. Alas, there wasn't enough time to tour the castle before closing, so we made our way to the beach instead. I had never confronted the North Sea before, much less stepped foot on an English beach, so I wasn't sure what to expect. It looked pretty much like a beach – sand, waves, beachgoers, dogs running loose. I stuck my hands in the water. Cold! North Sea. Check. Done that!

Bamburg Castle by the sea
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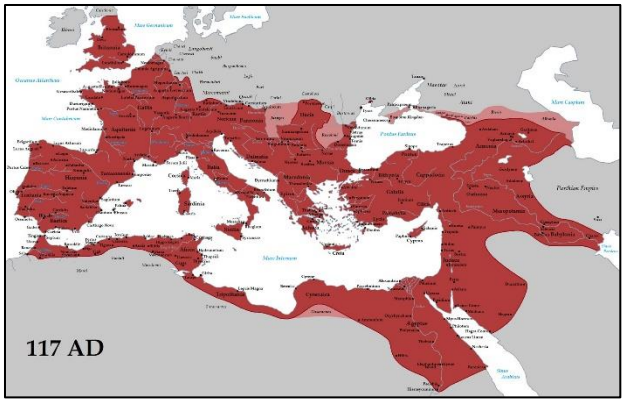
We made it to Hadrian's Wall just before sunset. We threw our things into our room at the Twice Brewed Inn, a busy enterprise that we liked immediately, and then drove across the road to a trailhead called Steel Rigg. We hustled to the Wall and pulled out our cameras – phones for me and Olivia, a digital SLR for Sterling. The evening was glorious, warm, clear, with pastoral views of farmland and soft hills. It was so good to be here! We got an early start the next morning, planning to spend the entire day walking on the Wall path. My prayers to the weather gods were answered – the day was sunny. We headed east. Construction on the wall began circa 122 AD on orders from Hadrian, the Roman Emperor, likely during a visit to Britannia. Under Trajan, Hadrian's predecessor, the Roman Empire reached its maximum size, encompassing nearly two million square miles (two-thirds the size of the continental U.S.). It included what today are North Africa, the Middle East, the Balkans, Turkey, Greece, southern Europe, Spain, France, and parts of Germany and England – essentially the entire known world at the time. The Romans were highly skilled at conquering, but it had become too much. Trajan expanded the Empire by capturing Dacia (modern Romania), but it took two costly wars. Hadrian had other ideas. He preferred consolidation, administration, and large-scale building projects. Such as a wall. Building a long one across the northern neck of Britannia suited his needs. It marked the boundary of 'civilization' in no uncertain terms, it kept the Picts and other barbarians to the north at bay, and it allowed the Empire to focus on settlement and exploitation – also Roman specialties.

Hadrian's Wall on our hike



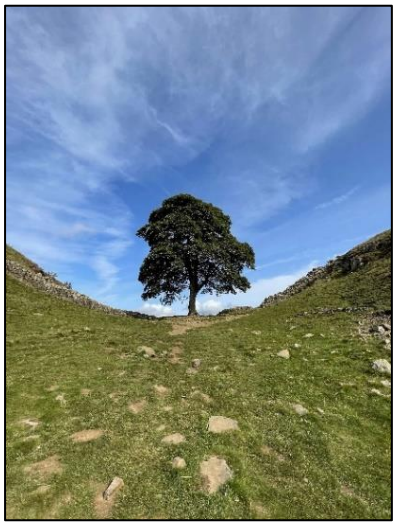
The Roman Empire at its maximum extent

Walking at different speeds, we spread out along the path, with Sterling zipping ahead. He and Olivia have always had a 'tortoise-and-hare' relationship as twins. Things came more easily for him, partly because American society favors boys over girls (let's be frank). He'd zoom ahead socially or academically while Olivia worked doggedly to get to the same places. Sterling knew everyone at their charter public high school, while Olivia struggled to overcome her shyness. She had an extra challenge. Born with a cleft palate, which affected an ear, she endured years of doctor

visits and orthodontia work. She remained cheery despite it all. Meanwhile, Sterling sailed along. So, when he eventually needed glasses, I bet Olivia did a silent fist pump. It tickled me to watch them walk along the wall path. Sterling would cruise ahead before stopping to take photographs, which allowed Olivia to catch up. Then they would take pictures together. For my part, I kept getting distracted by the Wall itself. After the Romans departed Britannia in the 5th century, the edifice deteriorated. Local farmers began scavenging its stones for their own walls and buildings. It was saved from oblivion by John Clayton, a clerk from Newcastle, who purchased sections in the late 19th century for preservation and study. Unfortunately, Clayton rebuilt long stretches of the Wall using non-Roman construction methods, causing heartburn among archaeologists later. In any case, the Wall is impressive to look upon. I loved the texture of the stones and kept stopping to take photos. It gave me an idea. In Scandinavia, I took photos of different historical pavements under my shoes, as Gen liked to do on our trips. In Alba, I'd shoot walls instead.

Pattern #1 (Hadrian)

I caught up with the kids at the famous Sycamore Gap tree. Estimated to be three hundred years old, the venerable tree had the good fortune to grow in one of the most photogenic spots along the Wall. The tree shot to fame when it starred in the 1991 film *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*. It became a national icon and perhaps the most photographed tree in the UK. In 2016, it was voted England's Tree of the Year. People have proposed under the tree, been married there, and had ashes of loved ones scattered there. I considered it. We were enchanted by the spot, taking many photos, especially Sterling who clicked away energetically. After taking my fill, I walked under the tree and sat on the edge of the Wall. This is where I planned to be on my 60th birthday in 2020, enjoying a contemplative celebration with Gen. Unfortunately, the gods played a cruel trick on all of us. Not only did they release the deadly and highly contagious Covid virus into the world, they did so during the presidency of the malign and utterly incompetent Donald J. Trump. One wonders what would have happened with a different president. That was an eon ago, however. Today, I was happy to sit on the Wall and watch my children enjoy the memorable moment under sunny English skies.



The next day we stopped at Vindolanda, a major Roman fort in the area and home to one of the best private museums I've ever encountered. Expecting a brief visit, we stayed until closing time. We began by lingering in the ruins of the fort and adjacent village, impressed by the extensive walls and rooms exposed for curious eyes. The site had been purchased in the 1930s by Professor Eric Birley, a lecturer and archaeologist who specialized in the history of the Roman occupation of northern England. The excavations in the ruins that he began have continued under the direction of his family and have produced spectacular discoveries, including the famous Vindolanda tablets.

The birthday party invitation by Claudia Severa

Written in the 2nd century AD – contemporary with Hadrian's Wall – these postcard-sized, hand-written notes, often in cursive Latin, capture day-to-day life in a Roman military fort in ways that are both banal and timeless. The most famous tablet is an invitation from the Commander's wife to a friend inviting her to a birthday party. A few of the tablets can be seen in a darkened room in the museum, but what I like most were the displays of everyday artifacts: boxing gloves (a rare find), coins, pendants, figurines of household deities, fancy ceramic dinner sets imported from France, and worn-out sandals of all shapes and sizes for all kinds of people. There was an entire room focused on wood, critical to every part of life on the frontier, and another room dedicated to the story of the excavations themselves.

Vindolanda operated from 85 AD until 370, when it was abandoned as part of a pull-back by the Romans. Forty years later, they packed up and left Britannia altogether. The legions were moved to the mainland in a desperate effort to stop 'barbarian' armies from overrunning the Empire. It didn't work. In 410, Rome was sacked by the Visigoths. It happened again in 455, this time at the hand of the Vandals, who pillaged the great city for two weeks. In Britannia, the native chieftains were undoubtedly relieved to see the backsides of their occupiers. What happened next, however, was probably not what they expected. In the power vacuum left by the Roman departure, a group of German tribes invaded Britain, including Angles, Jutes, and Saxons. Chaos ensued for centuries. Britons fought the Germans, the invaders fought each other, chieftains killed rivals, sons murdered fathers, brothers killed brothers, and armies clashed continuously. Eventually, seven kingdoms arose from the chaos, including Wessex in southern Britain. They emerged, however,

just in time to be devastated by waves of viking armies in the 9th century, including the Great Heathen Army of 865. Every kingdom was overrun by vikings except for Wessex – the 'last kingdom' – which rallied under the leadership of Alfred the Great (another ancestor of mine, but that's another story). King Alfred established an uneasy truce in the 880s, but chaos and violence broke out again between Britons and vikings lasting nearly two hundred more years. Matters were finally settled in 1066 when King Harold of England caught an invading viking army by surprise near York and wiped them out for good – only to be wiped out himself less than a month later by Rollo's great, great, great grandson.

William the Conqueror.

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After an overnight stay near Carlisle, we headed north. Bypassing Glasgow, we crossed the Firth of Clyde and drove along the bonnie banks of Loch Lomond of folk song fame. Taking the high road, we soon found ourselves in Trossachs National Park, created in 2002 to preserve the natural beauty of the area. We were amazed. As the road rose, the trees fell away, revealing stunning vistas in all directions. This was the southern edge of the famous Scottish Highlands, a geological, cultural, and linguistically distinct region. It was the historical home to fiercely independent clans, fearless rebels, and hardy warriors toughened by an unforgiving landscape (especially in winter). Ask the Romans. The northern and western regions of the Highlands were the home of the Picts, a Celtic-speaking tribe that caught the attention of the Romans when they attacked Hadrian's Wall in 297 AD. Not much is known about the Picts, except that they waged war continuously against occupiers, Romans first, then the Germans. By the 7th century, contemporary chroniclers were referring to the region as *Pictland*, ruled by a Pictish king. Then came the vikings, who attacked all the coasts and created settlements in the Orkney and Hebrides Islands. In reaction, Kenneth MacAlpin (Cináed), King of the Picts, conquered all rival kings in the mid-840s and declared the combined land to be the *Kingdom of Alba* – setting the stage for the birth of modern Scotland.

In the Highlands
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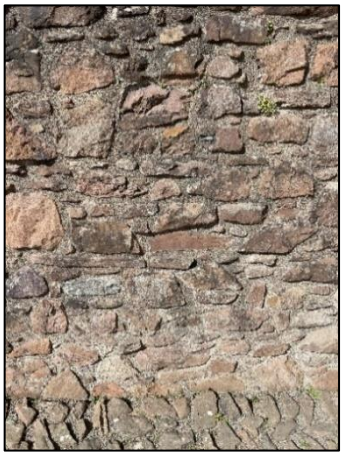
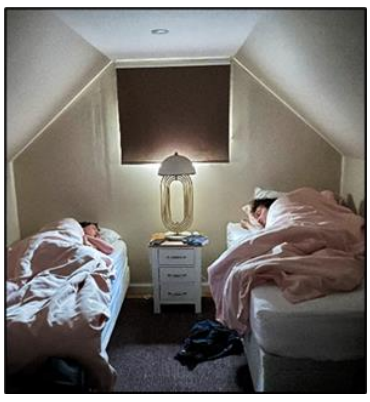
Urquhart Castle and Loch Ness

The next day, we stopped at Urquhart Castle, perched on the western shore of Loch Ness. I'm not a Bucket List type of person, but if I were, the famed lake would be on it. I am definitely not a monster believer, however, which likely places me in the minority where Nellie is concerned. Two weeks before our visit, volunteers spread out along the shores of Loch Ness in what organizers said was the largest Nellie search in fifty years. Employing high-tech drones, advanced sonar, and hundreds of people scanning the lake's waves online, it was the most sophisticated search ever. The result was the same. No monster. As for us, we just wanted to see the lake from the ramparts of the attractive castle. The rocky promontory was first fortified during Pictish times and an early version of Urquhart Castle was built in the 12th century, possibly by Highland rebels opposed to the rule of King David I. During the 1300s, the castle became contested ground during the Wars of Independence, as competing English and Scottish armies vied for control of the Great Glen Way, a natural highway which slices diagonally across the Highlands. In the 1500s, Urquhart Castle was the focus of a struggle between two Highland clans, culminating in 1545 with the 'Great Raid' in which the MacDonald clan stole two thousand cattle from the Grant clan and stripped the castle of furniture, cannon, and even its gates.



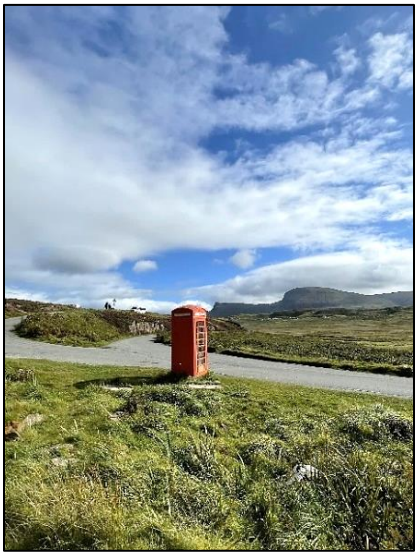
Pattern #2 (Urquhart)

We stopped for supper in Kilmore, a small village nearby. We ordered beers and sat outside on a lovely evening, laughing, and talking. It was so much fun to travel with Sterling and Olivia. Mature, thoughtful, and considerate, they were ideal companions. That they were my children was a bonus – and a source of pride. Nostalgia too. I awoke the next morning in our room at the bed-and-breakfast in Inverness to a sight that made my heart ache. The room had a slanted ceiling and the kids slept in twin beds across from each other, looking almost exactly like they did in an A-frame that we stayed in during our visits to the James Ranch, north of Durango, Colorado, when they were kids. One particular memory stands out. In June 2004, I was feeling highly stressed by an office situation at Quivira, so I scooped up the five-year old kids and whisked them to Durango for four days. It was heaven. We walked



all over town, ate at our favorite Mexican restaurant, and spent an entire day on the steam train that runs to Silverton and back. When we returned to A-frame that evening, we were covered in soot, exhilarated, and exhausted. When I checked on Sterling and Olivia the next morning, I saw the same image that I saw in Inverness. Our time together in Durango restored my spirits. I returned home reinvigorated for what lay ahead. I felt the same about our time together in Scotland. Twenty years on, travel and family still had the power to heal.

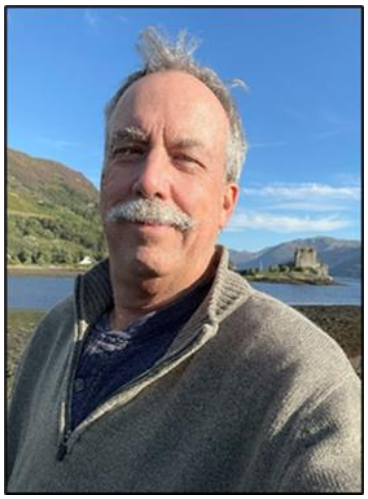
We spent the following day on the remote and magnificent Isle of Skye – where our Highland history lesson continued amidst a crush of traffic. We crossed a narrow strait to the island on the Skye Bridge which opened in 1995, ending centuries of ferrying from the mainland (the crossing brought to mind the *Skye Boat Song*, one of my favorites, originally sung by Skye-landers as they rowed people across the water). Skye is famous for its austere beauty, dominated by treeless valleys and windswept crags. It did not disappoint. Although the bumper-to-bumper traffic glued my attention to the road, I received regular reports from the kids about the spectacular scenery. Finally, we pulled over. Wow. Skye fell under viking control in the 9th century and is mentioned in Norse sagas, where its name can be translated as 'Island of Clouds' – a moniker easy to believe. Speaking of vikings, there is a Scottish connection with Rollo, the famous viking who led the colonization of Normandy. The *Orkneyinga Saga*, written in Iceland in the 13th century, chronicles the long line of viking jarls (earls) who ruled the Orkney Islands in northern Scotland, including Sigurd Eysteinsson who, supposedly, was the father of Hrólfr Rognvaldsson – aka Rollo. The Icelandic sagas are full of great stories but are notoriously suspect as histories. Nevertheless, there is a Rollo clan in Scotland which claims ancestry from the wandering viking. It first appears in a 1141 AD charter issued by an ally of King David I. Based at Duncrub Castle near Perth, the clan has had fourteen Lord Rollos, stretching back to Anthony Rollo (1577-1659). The current Lord, David Howard Rollo (born in 1943) is officially a member of the Peerage of Scotland and a member of Parliament.



A working phone booth on Skye

After lunch in Portree, Skye's main town, we drove around the mesmerizing Trotternish Peninsula. Although there wasn't much traffic, the road narrowed to a single lane, requiring negotiations with oncoming vehicles. At the tip of the peninsula, we stopped to see Duntulm

Castle, where an extremely strong sea breeze nearly blew us off our feet. At the end of the long, beautiful drive around the peninsula, we stopped in Portree again for cappuccinos. We were in no hurry to return to Inverness and kept pulling over for more photos, including requisite selfies. Tomorrow, we would begin the drive down the eastern side of Scotland, eventually returning to Edinburgh – and home. I wasn't ready. I wanted the trip to go on and on. That's one of the challenges with travel, there comes a point when you realize you're on the road to home. For some, I suppose it happens on the taxi ride to the airport, or maybe during supper the night before. For me, it always comes earlier. All my life, I've been sensitive to turning points, arcs, and thresholds. Spotting a rainbow always feels portentous. I don't know why. Perhaps it has something to do with an overactive imagination. Of course, big parts of life are straight lines, not circles. Your children won't be kids again. You can't have your spouse back. But that's why we take trips. Their circularity is a blessing. Finishing a journey means we get to travel to someplace new. I was already looking forward to 2024!



Selfie with castle

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We arrived in Aberdeen feeling as gray as the weather. The A96 highway from Inverness to Aberdeen was packed with vehicles the entire way. Speeds were slow and traffic jams frequent, testing my patience and my bladder, not to mention my lower back muscles. Olivia and Sterling calmly navigated us to our destination with skill and good cheer. Sterling gave me reassuring and much appreciated neck rubs. We planned to visit a castle on the way, but we were making such slow progress that we skipped. Then we lost the sun. Reaching Aberdeen, we headed downtown in search of supper. Aberdeen's architecture matched the weather, gray and cool. After a long search for a parking spot, we made our way to a colorful restaurant in what looked like a former church. The attractive outdoor seating area was full. While the kids kept an eye out for a table, I stepped inside. The place was packed with people. Happy, noisy people. A DJ stood in a pulpit cranking out upbeat tunes. What was going on? Sterling's friend Jack, who had attended the university here, warned us that Aberdeen was dull, dull, dull – but this looked like a great party! The kids secured a table outside, and as we settled in I scrutinized our fellow diners. Drinking and laughing, nearly all were male, white, and thirty-ish, though some were in their forties and fifties.
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Their attire was office casual. A few wore name badges. Ah. I queried our waiter. A conference, he replied with a shrug. Curious, I pulled out my phone. Not just any conference, I discovered, but the annual meeting of Offshore Europe – the trade association of North Sea oil and gas developers. More searching revealed this news: in July, Rishi Sunak, the UK's conservative Prime Minister, stood at a natural gas terminal near Aberdeen and made a pledge to "max out" oil and gas reserves in the North Sea with a new round of drilling. No wonder the Offshore Europe conference attendees were partying. Scientists promptly criticized Sunak's decision as catastrophic for climate change. Others pointed out that Sunak made his pledge in the middle of a global heat wave.

Dunnottar Castle

The next day, the kids and I were in desperate need of a castle. Fortunately, there was a spectacular one nearby – Dunnottar Castle. We arrived on a foggy morning. The castle is perched on a spit of land surrounded on three sides by the North Sea. The only approach is steeply downhill to a neck of land, then uphill to an intimidating wall and a solitary door. The fog gave the whole scene a spooky, ethereal feel. Dunnottar certainly has its ghosts. In 900 AD, the King of Alba, Donald II, was killed at Dunnottar while fighting a party of vikings, possibly under the command of the King of Norway. Was Rollo part of the raid? The dates work. That would be an interesting twist! In 954, Donald's son King Malcolm I was killed at Dunnottar. In 1297, rebel William Wallace used trickery to capture the castle where he imprisoned four thousand English soldiers before burning them alive. Not everyone had a bad time. King Edward III of England visited Dunnottar in 1336. Mary Queen of Scots visited twice, as did King James VI. In 1651, during the English Civil War, the Honours of Scotland – the royal crown, sword, and scepter – were hidden at Dunnottar to keep them out of the hands of Oliver Cromwell and the royal-hating English. Cromwell ordered the castle to be seized, but the Honours were gone, smuggled out, the story goes, in a bag of seaweed by a fisherman.

We had a grand time. Dunnottar is everything a ruined castle should be – stony buildings to explore, fortified defenses to contemplate, nooks and crannies to investigate, and stunning views from every window. I knew we were going to take lots of photos. I loved the modern touches too. The entrance booth is cleverly fitted into a sharp bend in a narrow passage that was originally designed to foil an attacking army. We spent a bunch of time exploring the elaborate defenses of

the gateway, impressed yet again by how much human ingenuity goes into fighting and killing. Following the entrance path through two defensive tunnels, we emerged to a tranquil, park-like setting full of gray structures and green lawns. In the bustle of the castle's long history, with its violent episodes and regal comings-and-goings, it was easy to overlook that a family called Dunnottar home. In 1359, William Keith, the chief of the Keith clan, married Margaret Fraser, a niece of Robert the Bruce, King of the Scots, and was granted Dunnottar and its fiefdom. The Keith family held Dunnottar for four hundred years, raising children, entertaining guests, celebrating weddings and victories. The Keiths were the hereditary Marshals of Scotland, tasked with protecting the King and his regalia. In the 1500s, they became earls, joining the Peerage, and embarked on an energetic program of construction. Unfortunately, George Keith, the 8th Earl, decided in 1715 to support the doomed Jacobite uprising against King George I of England, which resulted in the forfeiture of his titles, lands, and castles. Dunnottar passed through a series of neglectful owners over the next two centuries, falling into disrepair, before being restored and opened to the public by its current owner.

Pattern #3 (Dunnottar)

A room with a view

The kids and I separated to explore the castle at our own speed. I took a leisurely pace, content to wander wherever my curiosity led. My thoughts drifted. What is it about ruins? I've been fascinated all things ruined since age thirteen, when I went on a five-week road trip to Mexico that featured eye-popping Toltec, Olmec, and Mayan ruins, among others. They fired up an intellectual curiosity about history and cultures that has not lost an ounce of fervor in sixty years. Another big influence on my teenage self was a book my mother owned called *Pleasure of Ruins* by Rose Macaulay, a English travel writer. The book took readers on an inspiring tour of classical ruins around the world and featured stunning photographs. I wanted to see those places too! I also wanted to know their stories, who did what and why. At Dunnottar, for example, around 1600 AD a secret staircase was built that led to the bedchamber of the wife of the 5th Earl, George Keith, which was unusual for the time. Well, she used the staircase to conduct a long affair with another aristocrat and ultimately ran away with him, taking the bulk of her husband's fortune with her!

The next day, we traveled south to see the last castle of our trip – Stirling. First, we took a detour inland. My target was Dunkeld, a village on the Tay River and home to a famous medieval cathedral and monastery. It was the place where the genealogical watershed of Alba flowed into the family tributary I mentioned earlier: *Dunkeld Creek*. For me, the headwaters of *Dunkeld Creek* stretch back to Pictland, where a creek emerges in the 840s when Kenneth MacAlpin establishes the Kingdom of Alba. From there, the creek flows unbroken for nearly two hundred years until 1035 when King Malcolm II dies without sons. A new creek enters at this point. One of Malcolm's daughters, Bethóc, married Crínán of Dunkeld and bore a son, Donnchad – known to us as Duncan. On the death of Malcolm II, he became King Duncan I – the founder of the House of Dunkeld which would rule Scotland until 1286. Duncan was the grandfather of King David I, who we met in Edinburgh, and thus my ancestor. That's why we detoured to Dunkeld.

Dunkeld Cathedral

The sun came out as we approached. We had a mid-afternoon appointment at Stirling Castle, an hour away, which didn't give us much time in town. We hustled to the cathedral for photos. Standing in the aisle with the kids, I tried to quickly explain why we were here. King David I of Scotland had a son, Prince Henry Dunkeld, who married Ada de Warenne in 1139. Ada was the youngest of fourteen children borne by her mother, Elizabeth, via two marriages. Fourteen! Ada's father was handsome William de Warenne, Earl of Surrey. Rumor was that he seduced Elizabeth while she was still married to her elderly husband, Robert de Beaumont, who subsequently died of a broken heart. William's father fought at the Battle of Hastings alongside William the Conqueror. Prince Henry of Scotland nearly died early in 1139 when he rode too close to Ludlow Castle, which was under siege by King Stephen of England. He was caught by a grappling hook thrown from a castle battlement, dragging him from his horse. Henry was saved by King Stephen himself, who rode up and won a tug-of-war with the hook. After Henry and Ada were married they had to dodge an ambush on the road home organized by the jealous Earl of Chester, who apparently had murder on his mind. Despite surviving all these travails Henry never became King of Scotland. He died in 1152 after a prolonged and mysterious illness that might have been cancer, though there were rumors he had been poisoned. Fortunately for Scotland (and us) he and Ada had five children. The two eldest sons, Malcolm and William, became kings.

Restored royal room

By the time we reached Stirling Castle the day had grown hot. The parking lot was full, so we found a spot in town and then hiked steeply uphill to the castle. It proved to be a little too much for Olivia. She felt overheated and dehydrated, so we took a break in a grassy area near the entrance while I ran back to the car for Advil and Sterling fetched water. On my return, we released him to wander off and take photos while I sat in the shade of the castle with Olivia. It reminded me of our trip to Prague in 2019 with Gen, when the three of us sat in the shade of the city's huge cathedral on an equally warm day enjoying a quiet moment together in a beautiful place. Olivia recovered quickly and we dispersed into the castle grounds. I had lowered my expectations for Stirling, thinking it would be a reprise of the stately but lackluster Edinburgh Castle. The seat of the Scottish monarchy for centuries, Stirling Castle is large, intact, occupied, and neat as a pin. Queen Elizabeth II of England visited several times to inspect troops as part of her duties as the ruling monarch of Scotland. My low expectations were unwarranted. Stirling was a lovely edifice, full of stylish rooms, and homey open spaces. A royal suite had been restored to its 15th century opulence. Each royal room was inhabited by volunteers dressed in period costumes who cheerfully answered questions from inquisitive tourists. One young woman sang for us in the Queen's chamber. The whole experience was lovely. The kids felt the same way and we kept wandering around the castle until closing time. Stirling was the center of attention for important parts of Scottish medieval history and various significant battlefields could be spied from its lofty ramparts. But I was worn out from history. I was happy with textures and fresh air – and spending time with my children.

Pattern #4 (Stirling)

The next day was our last, alas. It was also my birthday. My hope was that we could return to Edinburgh for a celebratory pint and sticky toffee pudding at an historic pub that I had spied during our earlier visit. Fortunately, the travel gods smiled – the weather was warm and sunny, and the complicated logistics of returning the rental car (with no damage!), then walking to our airport hotel, and then getting downtown all went smoothly. It helped that Sterling and Olivia are such good travelers – and such good people. I loved spending two weeks with them, not just as a dad

but also as a fellow traveler. They were great company, fun, cheerful, interesting, and more than willing to roll with dad's 'let's-see-another-castle!' ambitions. Travel is stressful, especially the way I do it. I always have a big agenda with lots of places to see, miles to cover, and as much history to discover as possible. Living out of a suitcase for two weeks is hard enough, but I also kept us on the move. It's been that way forever for us as a family. Gen was always game and the kids grew up with dad hustling everyone out the door for the next destination. Nothing has changed, except we didn't have mom. That was hard, but it was another reason to travel together again – to explore the world now as a threesome. We did great. Our trip together to Alba was the best birthday present I've ever had.

I couldn't wait until our next adventure.

My birthday present

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