

Six Degrees of Latitude: Travel Tales of Scotland and Ireland

Leslie Lee

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Six Degrees of Latitude is engaging as it salutes a woman's discovery of, and connection to, Scottish and Irish locales.

Leslie Lee's travel book *Six Degrees of Latitude* is both an intimate journal and an overview of Scottish and Irish lore.

The book is front-loaded with detailed maps, ancestral trees, and a chronicle of major events in Ireland and Scotland dating back to the Ice Age. Still, the bulk of the book is devoted to recounting Lee's three trips to Alba and the Emerald Isle over a span of fifteen years. While some locations repeat in later adventures, each trek has its own flavor and focus. Lee traces her own Scottish family background, too, in the course of her visits to ancient cairns, far-off islands, and picturesque villages. Each journal entry is straightforward and unpretentious in tone, with Lee ruminating on factors like the meaning of Pictish stones, and delivering wry observations about the rituals of getting ready for dinner in a country house.

Lee's travel companions range from seniors to energetic travel buffs, and much of the book's charm is provided by the travelers' idiosyncrasies and individual reactions to their culture shock. They are called to dinner by a bagpiper, and learn the vagaries of negotiating a roundabout while driving on the left side of the road. These accounts are complemented by sketches illustrating Lee's travels, which range from studies of salt shakers on an inn table to expansive landscapes. A sense emerges that travel is most illuminating when one can take the time to absorb and appreciate the surrounding environment.

The book is less interested in cities than it is in rural locales, where it captures people and sites in terms of their distinctive characteristics. Serendipitous moments rein: there's a tomahawk-throwing contest, an impromptu dinner in a castle library, and a visit to Glenmorangie during a whiskey festival that Lee did not expect. Lee writes about spending an evening with Scottish locals during the country's tumultuous independence vote in 2014; she has a chance encounter with one of the last true bagpipers in the Scottish highlands. Her appreciation for local cultures and histories is acute.

After Lee and her companions have explored castles, mystical islands, and other colorful remnants of the past, the book concludes with a stirring paean to Scotland that seeks to reconcile Lee's American and Scottish roots. Practical travel tips, checklists, and timelines of Scottish and Irish history append this; while they are useful, they are less distinctive than Lee's journal entries, which more successfully inspire curiosity, wonder, and a desire to visit the places she discusses.

Both insightful and personal, the travel book *Six Degrees of Latitude* is engaging as it salutes Leslie Lee's discovery of, and connection to, Scottish and Irish locales.

HO LIN (April 12, 2022)

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