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## It's not where you live, but where your heart is

On a visit to the Scottish town of his ancestors, an American man comes 'home.'

By **John Stirling Moir** | JULY 9, 2007

I have never met the older Scottish couple walking toward me on the cobbled street – yet I feel as though I have known them forever.

A facial tissue peeks from one sleeve of the woman's cardigan, and the man wears a tweed jacket and tartan tie. His arm links with his wife's, and as they approach, he glances at me. I send them a silent salutation.

The couple's ruddy faces and pragmatic strides remind me of my father's collection of sepia photographs of our forebears, who emigrated from Scotland to North America.

I am spending a week in my ancestral home of Stirling, a city in the heart of Scotland built around a castle that has guarded the Highlands for centuries.

Even though I have never lived here, I consider it my consummate home.

Two hundred years ago, my great-great-great grandfather, a farmer named George Moir, asked a bonny lass named Jane Stirling to marry him. Ever since, the name Stirling has been passed down in my family. It was my father's middle name, it's mine, and it's my son's.

As a boy, I remember staring mesmerized at my father's pictures of Stirling Castle. The castle crowns a volcanic butte that towers over the neighboring countryside. Some of its stone walls stand just a few feet from striated cliffs that plunge to the plain below.

I have always thought of Stirling Castle as an enduring link to my past. For me, it is what the Scots might call a *bield*: a shelter or refuge. It is the home of my heart.

On the last day of my visit, I'm having lunch at a small bakery when I see the Scottish couple again. I smile at them as they pass my table.

The man asks if I'm visiting, and I tell them that I'm from California. As we chat, they recount how they have recently moved from Aberdeen to Stirling.

"A lifetime ago, we attended high school together here in Stirling," the man says. "And we liked one another – a lot. But after graduation, we went our separate ways and married other people. A few years ago, each of us lost our spouse. One day, we both happened to go shopping in the same Aberdeen grocery store, and we recognized each other."

"It's amazing," the woman says, "the timeless connection you have with a first love. We hadn't seen each other in 47 years, and after a cup of coffee it was as if we had always been together. We were married six months later. And we decided to come back home to Stirling."

"What brings you here?" the man asks me.

"I have also come home."

As I tell them about my ancestors who lived here, I pull a scrap of paper from my wallet with a few lines from a poem by my favorite Scottish writer, Robert Louis Stevenson. I found the poem on my first visit to Stirling 20 years ago. The words jumped off the page at me, almost as if Stevenson had written them for me:

It's ill to loose the bonds that God decreed to bind. Still, we will be children of the heather and the wind. Far away from home, O it's still for you and me, That the broom is blowing bonny in the north countrie.

"A true home is like a first love," the woman says. "It's powerful. It pulls you."

The man's eyes twinkle. "And this time of year, you'll have no trouble seeing Scotch broom."

We bid farewell, and one last time I ascend to Stirling Castle along a narrow street flanked by stone buildings. As I approach the castle entrance, subdued sunlight illuminates its mighty walls.

A sightseeing bus arrives, and a group of Scottish tourists emerges. Many of them bear a resemblance to the couple I talked with earlier. Some of these visitors hold hands as they walk toward the castle over wet grass steaming in the sun.

The day is clear, and we can see almost all the way across the green hills of Scotland. Clusters of yellow Scotch broom ripple in the breeze. We traverse the castle's stone bridge and pass through its secure wooden gates.

I am home.

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