

# Love's great adventure

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## **Andrew Drummond tells LEE RANDALL how a Scot who walked the length of Tsarist Russia inspired him**

Aspiring authors stumped for subject matter would be wise to peruse the history books, says Edinburgh native Andrew Drummond, who's let me infiltrate his Morningside home on his day off, to talk about his latest novel, *Novgorod the Great*.

With his keen eye for quirky details and intriguing personalities, Drummond has so far found inspiration on the train tracks, in *An Abridged History of the Construction of the Railway Line between Garve, Ullapool and Lochinver*, in the international language movement, with *Volapuk*, and in the surprising death of a pachyderm on the road from Broughty Ferry, for *Elephantina*.

His witty, warm novels, which have won favourable comparisons with Alasdair Gray's "brand of Gothic fantasy", all share a certain quirkiness of style. So thoroughly does Drummond immerse himself in the style of the period he's writing about, that they're constructed as if they, themselves, are marvellous discoveries from another age

Despite his prolificacy - he's completed several as yet unpublished novels, and has ideas for more - Drummond, who's 57, isn't a full-time author. He has a day job in IT. With a shrug, he explains: "It was either that, or become a teacher - and since everyone else in my family is a teacher, I didn't want to do that."

He married and moved to London, but ten years on, convinced that children and the Big Smoke were a bad mix, the family returned to Scotland and he found work with what was then Lothian Regional Council. That was 20 years ago. His son and daughter are now grown, making it much easier for Drummond to put in a few hours perfecting the writer's craft, after dinner and on weekends.

This second career might be relatively new, but the impulse was always there, he tells me. "I'd been writing ever since school. Then I won the Scotsman Orange short story competition back in 2003 or so, and after that, published my first novel."

His fourth, *Novgorod the Great*, transports us to an eccentric, Fawlty Towers-style inn in the eponymous city, located on the road between St Petersburg and Moscow, on the Volkhov River. Despite the exotic setting, it turns out that there's a strong Scottish connection: in another part of the world - at another time - we encounter fictionalised versions of the once very real Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone, and his son, John Dundas Cochrane. They, too, are holed up in an insalubrious inn, except they are in South America.

While Cochrane senior tries to grab a night's sleep, his son struggles to impress his dad with tales from his trek across Siberia. But it's a race against the Grim Reaper, for he is being consumed by a fatal fever.

"The genesis of the book was initially the story of John Cochrane," says Drummond. "Starting in 1820, he made an incredible journey from Dieppe to the far side of Russia, and back again, mostly by foot or by really bizarre means of transport. I acquired his two-volume journal of that journey, and it's an absolutely incredible story."

Cochrane's adventures were as mind-boggling as they were amusing. "The first of which was getting mugged on the road from St Petersburg.

He was stripped naked and tied to a tree. In his journal he said that when he was released, because he only had two shirts left, he (made them into) a kilt, effectively, and set off back down the road, barefoot. He came to a group of people and got a lift in somebody's carriage, and then, bizarrely, said that after three miles he felt so cold that he got out and walked. It was that kind of attitude that appealed to me."

That off-kilter attitude seems to have been genetic. His father, Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone, was an amazing chancer. Born in Edinburgh in 1767, he married money, and after his wife's death, went to the West Indies where he was eventually blamed for (among other things) a mutiny among the black soldiers. Later in life, Cochrane-Johnstone was expelled from public office for taking part in the great Stock Exchange Swindle of 1814, and accused of bribery and fraud.

"The father is a real nutter," says Drummond, "a real criminal case. And the whole family seemed to have things for very young girls. John marries a girl aged 15, cousin Charles was always after young girls, Andrew wasn't much better. And in fact Thomas Cochrane, the famous admiral, his wife was 15 or 16 as well. I don't know whether it was a 19th-century thing, but to the 21st century mind it looks odd."

John Cochrane's bride really got under Drummond's skin, and he longed to know more about her. "When he got to Kamchatka, he married Ksenia, who was barely 15, and brought her all the way back to London - mainly by horse, but then all the horses eventually died as they got further west. When they finally got to London he wrote his book and promptly left her there! She was about 16. He went off to South America and died! I thought, poor girl!" Drummond did some sleuthing to find out more about "Mrs Cochrane" - as she is referred to in her husband's journal. Feeling desperate, he wrote to the Russian envoy here, who passed his letter on to the archivist in Kamchatka, who unearthed her name and some biographical details. Armed with that information, Drummond was ready to spin his tale.

The sections devoted to Ksenia - which amount to a bitter-sweet holiday romance - take place in 1833, long after Cochrane's death, when she is travelling alone to Odessa. Along the way she encounters an exotic merchant - also, though more loosely, based on a real person. Horatio is an enormous West Indian who, because truth is always stranger than fiction, actually worked for, or was the slave of,

Alexander Cochrane-Johnstone when he was governor of Dominica and, even more bizarrely, gave John Cochrane a lift to St Petersburg years later.

During the course of a long night spent at the bedside of a dying ex-soldier, Ksenia and Horatio form a bond and each in his or her own way, dreams of the future they might share together. It's quite a fantasy, for both parties harbour secrets that throw the likelihood of a happy ending into question.

"I'm thinking that for one night, completely away from all her ties, she felt that she could be her own woman. That was my hope," says Drummond with a shy grin.

He admits he'd always wanted to write a love story. "I wanted to write a book where I wasn't taking the piss all the time. My first three books really haven't been malicious, but they were about knocking ideals on the head. I thought, let's be positive about life for a change. And by the time I got to know who Ksenia was and what had happened to her, I wanted her to have a good time."

Her plight - dragged halfway across the planet only to be dumped when adventure called - put this reader in mind of the legion of explorers' wives who waved goodbye to their men for years at a time, never knowing when, or if, they'd return.

Nodding, Drummond says, "All these guys went out to help Britain expand the empire, partly because after the Napoleonic wars they were naval men on half pay with nothing to do. They presumably left behind vast numbers of women and children. What did the women get up to? In those days, women would not be as liberated, so presumably they were sitting at home waiting?"

But why, after dragging Ksenia from the eastern tip of Siberia back to London, on foot, didn't Cochrane take her to South America? "That's right, it's quite bizarre. By the end of their trip both of them were absolutely almost crippled; they both suffered tremendously.

When they set off the temperatures were dropping all the time. At the start, when they still had lots of horses, she was thrown twice, and on the second occasion, almost died. At their journey's end they had to rest up for about two months to recover. But as I say, they both made it, so she was quite as capable of suffering as he was."

That's not the only question hanging over the book. Throughout, nearly every character asks and is asked "What is love?" As you'd expect, the answers are wide-ranging and ever-changing.

"More or less everything is about love," says Drummond. "It is one of those words that is either totally meaningful or meaningless. It's how you feel about a person and that depends on who you are and who the person is. People do the strangest things in the name of love, but what it is, is down to the individual."

Well, I think it's safe to say that this book will be loved by anyone keen on tales of derring-do, and everyone who's ever met an entrancing stranger and found themselves asking, "What if?"

- Novgorod the Great is published by Polygon Books, 9.99