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Jeanette Abendstern

Hestan Island



Writers' Walks



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Jeanette Abendstern is a poet, activist and campaigner from South West Scotland. She is encouraged in writing poetry by her partner, Brian Leaver, who offers specialist knowledge, constructive feedback and some braw words and phrases.





Writers' Walks



Hestan Island

Hestan Island is a tiny isle at the mouth of Auchencairn and Orchardton Bays. It is accessible at low tide from Almorness Point, via a natural causeway of shingle and mussel shells, known as the Rak, Wrack or Rack. A caution to walkers attempting the crossing: Before reaching the causeway, it's necessary to cross a burn known as Auchencairn Lane. Conditions are unpredictable, as it changes route and depth through time and tides.

Alternatively, Hestan Island can be reached by a trek over the mudflats from the mainland. For either route, it is advisable to go with someone who has knowledge of the terrain, sands and tides; and to "tread lightly" in consideration of flora and fauna.

Hestan Island has a rich and intriguing history, dating back to Mesolithic times. The monks created a pool at the end of the causeway to trap fish and may have used it as grazing ground. In the fourteenth century it gave refuge to Edward Balliol who, as Edward III of England's choice of monarch, had to be supplied from Bristol, to avoid the hostility of the Scots to his reign. The caves on the south west of the island were used as hideaways for smuggled goods in the eighteenth century; lace, tea, brandy.

Hestan Island was the inspiration for Rathen Isle in S.R. Crockett's 1894 novel "The Raiders", a best seller in its day, described as a compelling adventure story and much more besides. S.R. Crockett wrote with empathy, humour and a refreshing feminism.

"There was a great silence – only a sougling from the south, where the tides of the Solway, going either up or down, kept for ever chafing against the rocky end of our little isle of Rathen."

S.R. Crockett.

Time and Tide

A bone-shaking ride along a stony track, bicycles abandoned,
and a scramble through bracken, bramble, whin, to Almorness Point.

Slack tide!

Tables consulted for tide with time to coincide, provisioned with flask, cheese piece,
and – gleaned locally – knowledge of the sands, we peer out to Hestan Isle.

“Green gem of the Solway”*, mysterious, remote, unreachable – seemingly.

On the edge of the bay, on the edge of history.

Cistercian monks, a vassal king, smugglers and copper miners, all left their mark.

Generations of local folks too, Herons, Tweedies, McWilliams, Houstons.

Cormorants now colonise, Corvus Marinus, Ravens of the Sea.

Eddie Parker was part of this place, unofficial Laird of the Isle,

salmon fisherman, herder of sheep, lighthouse tender.

We watch and wait.

Hours pass before three horses gallop across the bay – a signal!

Sea ebbs swiftly, tiny waves betray course of mussel rak causeway.

Following out high spring tide, we clamber over rocks, in time to spy –
magic carpet of shingle and shells unfurling.

Irene Parker cautioned - Eddie never set foot without testing.

“Beware the quaggy qua”* beneath the firm crust.

The shaft of an old garden hoe serves the purpose.

The sand is firm as we wade across the channel of Auchencairn Lane to reach
the rak and cross to Hestan.

There – to be enfolded by Lakeland fells and crags across the Solway Firth,
and well kent hills, Suie, Culnaightrie, Bengairn, Screel, on the Galloway coast.

There, where sea meets gleaming mudflats, meets pale grey sky,
we listen to Curlews’ quavery calls as time deepens.

Remembering time lengthens too; knowing tide will turn, we hurry to explore!

Later, in the village, we nod to Eddie Parker,

pictured in side-burned profile on the pub sign,

barrel of brandy balanced on shoulder.

We are late for our table at The Old Smugglers Inn.

We blame – time and tide