

In the Footsteps of Penguins and Sheep

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Boreray Island

Considering the hundreds of miles I have spent traveling around Scotland the past two years, it seems criminal that that my first encounter with Scottish author Debbie Zawinski should take place via Zoom from my home in Maine. And yet, within minutes of our screens connecting my cluttered office with her charming country kitchen, I feel as if we are seated next to each other sharing a cup of tea. We spend the first twenty minutes (possibly more) sharing dog stories. Henry, Zawinski's relatively new puppy is making she and her husband rethink the "wisdom" of getting a young dog. Henry requires more monitoring than 24-hour security detail. From destruction to disappearance, he has a stunning track record of doing everything naughty. But with the roll of her eyes and a quick laugh, Zawinski admits Henry is otherwise irresistibly adorable. I am anxious to see this naughty Henry on screen, but again Zawinski laughs and tells me her husband has taken Henry out for a walk to insure we aren't disturbed.

At the heart of our discussion is a seemingly simple question: why did Zawinski spend months walking (and occasionally boating and busing) around the Scottish Isles under glorious skies and torrential downpours with her tent and her knitting needles while gathering tufts of fleece shed from ten different Scottish breeds? And how did this unusual sojourn become, *In the Footsteps of Sheep: Tales of a Journey Through Scotland, Walking, Spinning, and Knitting Socks?*



Debbie Zawinski

Originally from Cardiff, Wales, Zawinski has been taking long walks since she was a child.

“Our family would escape to the countryside for the weekend and that’s where my love of long walks began. Walking connects you with the earth in a unique way.”

“I can understand the value in walking, but sleeping in a tent adds an extra layer of challenge, or should I say discomfort?”

“Not really,” Zawinski replies with the same sweet laugh she uses when describing Henry’s antics. “Having a tent offers you independence. If you do everything by B&B, then you have a schedule. You need to walk “x” number of miles in a day. It’s like the traveling in India and Nepal that I did with my daughter. If we stayed in nice hotels, it would have been a completely different experience. Scotland has a “Right to Roam” law so you can camp practically anywhere. If I like a particular spot, then I can just put up my tent. When I stayed on North Ronaldsay, for example, I spent the night some place new every night—each one was a completely different experience. Otherwise, the only place to stay on the island is the Bird Observatory.”

I well remember staying at the Bird Observatory back in 2005. At the time, the highlight was seeing the famous seaweed eating sheep along with the newly installed Mini-Mill in the decommissioned lighthouse. It was also the first time I took a flight where the sheep needed to be cleared from the runway before landing. Zawinski’s chapter on North Ronaldsay, however, describes an encounter with a ram that is equal parts sweet and aching.

“I was walking along the stonewall when I came upon a ram that had somehow either fallen or gotten trapped. I could tell he was quite poorly and honestly, I thought he would soon die. I knew if I could get him standing, he might have a chance, but there really wasn’t much life left. I went to find help and finally a shepherd and I were able to get him standing.”

“In the book, you talk about deciding to name the ram Angus, why?”

“I can’t really tell you why. He just had a presence; he demanded to be named and the name was Angus. No other name suited him. You know, once we got him standing he seemed like he might be coming around. Eventually, another shepherd came by with a truck and took Angus back to the farm where he could be tended more closely. Afterwards, the shepherd looked at me and casually shrugged his shoulders and said, ‘Oh, getting stuck, it’s their hobby.’”

“Do you know if Angus survived?”

“I don’t. Sometimes it’s better not to know and just believe that he did. The whole thing was quite extraordinary. There we were two people who have never met sharing this moment taking care of this sheep. You can’t plan these things, but they stay with you forever.”

“There are ten different sheep breeds with accompanying socks that you made and designed. Ultimately, each pair (including one extra combining all ten breeds) was gifted to someone instrumental in your journey. In fact, the idea of creating socks with stories is something you have done for friends for quite some time. Of all the socks in the book, there is only one fleece you didn’t collect yourself, the Boreray—from the formidable rocky edifice by the same name that is part of the St Kilda archipelago. I confess, when I saw there was a chapter on Boreray, I was more than envious you were able to land there. But the Boreray story—and the socks— didn’t turn out like the other chapters.”

“It’s true. I desperately wanted to land on Boreray and collect the fleece myself. But, as you know, it’s a very difficult and potentially dangerous place to land. In fact, the only people who go there do so for research. I was introduced to Stewart who was a former ranger on Boreray. He has been doing bird studies on Boreray for decades. He agreed to take me, but also explained that he would charge a fee: I must knit him a pair of socks! At the time, I thought, ‘he doesn’t know what a big ask that is.’”

Of course, so is going to Boreray.

“To get to St Kilda, everything depends on the weather and our trip was postponed several times. Finally, we took off and I was so excited. But as we approached the sea was quite rough and we ultimately decided it was better not to try. As I look back, I think I probably could have made it on to the island. But I’ll never know.

Anyhow, Stewart kindly collected me a big bag of fleece. I have compared it to some of the Boreray fleece found on the mainland. It’s definitely different. The sheep on Boreray have a more pronounced double-coat. You figure they need to have the very best protection in order to survive out there—either they make it, or they don’t.”

“Do you think you will try and go back?”

“Of course, I would like to try again but I don’t know. Stewart is getting on and I’m nearly ten years older, so maybe I will have to just leave it. He gave me the most beautiful ram’s horn after I made him the socks.” Zawinski disappears from the screen for a moment and returns with a gloriously spiraling horn.

Now, I am definitely envious.

Despite not being able to land on Boreray, Zawinski did pitch her tent on Hirta, the main island in St Kilda where small expedition ships (like the one I am typically on) are able to go ashore via Zodiac. But unlike the ship’s passengers who are shuttled back to the ship after several hours, Zawinski could luxuriate all night surrounded by hundreds of sheep grazing quietly beside her tent. Comparatively few people are able to reach St Kilda and even fewer have the rare privilege of spending the night. There is no doubt Zawinski is rewarded for her fortitude more than a hundred-fold.

For me, *In the Footsteps of Sheep* is more than just an intimate journey traveling from one island to the next, it is further enhanced by Zawinski’s pictures which are every bit as creative as her storytelling and knitting patterns. I was surprised to learn that from the beginning, she didn’t plan on writing a book

“Oh no, I never gave it a second thought until I got home and found one of Elizabeth Zimmerman’s books. Then, I realized, maybe my journey could become a book as well. Everything now is done by email but I decided I would do things a bit different, so I printed out the book, punched three holes in the pages, tied them together with handspun yarn and sent it to Luath, a publisher in Edinburgh at the end of the Royal Mile.”

My jaw drops to the floor. “You did not!”

“Oh yes, I did. It took them some time to respond and eventually I went for a meeting. They seemed interested but then after awhile I didn’t hear anything, so I contacted Schoolhouse Press in the US. From the beginning, they have been wonderful to work with, but Luath has now reached out to me again. They want to know if I will write another book?”

“Well, will you?”

“It is already written, *Stories and Stitches*. After my first book I wanted to follow up with a similar journey through Wales but then came the pandemic. However, over the years, I have made a lot of patterns from my various travels, including while trekking over the Shangri-la. That’s the thing about knitting, you can do it anywhere. Often people will start talking to you because you are knitting. Otherwise, they might never say a word.”

It is true, knitting in public often starts conversations much the same way you might greet someone out walking their dog. Take away the dog and they are just two strangers passing by.

I ask Zawinski if she plans on taking Henry camping?

“Oh my gosh, what a nightmare that would be! But I would like to think someday he will come along. Right now, I am happy because I have just bought myself a new sleeping bag. It is a bit heavier than the one I have been using, but I am hoping this one will keep me warm.”

This final comment is a testament to Zawinski’s optimism, but it also gives me pause. How is it she is just now getting a sleeping bag that will keep her warm?

“I always travel light. I only carry a small, 25-liter backpack. Now that I have a new sleeping bag it weighs a bit more. I suppose I will have to take out a few things to make up for it.”

Shortly before our conversation ends, Henry can be heard returning home from his walk. I quietly wonder what antics he has been up to, and then I think, perhaps there is a book to be written about Henry too.

Zawinski’s path leans towards the unconventional, which is why this is the perfect time to take an extra moment and talk about Hannah Johns, another woman who prefers coloring outside the lines. But unlike, Zawinski who follows in the footsteps of sheep, Johns is more apt to be walking in the footsteps of penguins.



Hannah Johns on “southern” mountaintop

I first met Johns last winter where we were both working as part of the expedition team on a ship in Antarctica. Unlike virtually every other member of the team (excluding myself) who are hired because they possess advanced scientific degrees relevant to the polar region, Johns joined the team because she had spent two seasons working as the post mistress on Port Lockroy; the most southerly post office in the world and a former research station operated by the British Antarctic Survey. Now, it provides thousands of visitors the opportunity to send a postcard from the White Continent.

Stamping post cards may sound like simple work until you quickly calculate that Port Lockroy can sometimes have several hundred visitors in a day and rare is the person who is sending just one post card, they might send twenty. But just as Zawinski didn't set out to write a book, Johns never thought about working in a post office, let alone on a small island in Antarctica, and so I ask her how it all began?

“I was the first one in my family to go to university and afterwards I became a teacher. After two years I was offered a promotion, but I turned it down. I decided I would rather travel. That's really when it started.”

I'm not exactly sure what Johns means by “it.”

“I realized I wanted to travel the world as much as possible, but I soon realized I didn't want to spend more than two years in any one spot.”

“So exactly how did you wind up in Antarctica?” I ask.

“I had been teaching English as a foreign language in Japan, when I heard about Peace Boat, which provides a multi-cultural exchange program while sailing all over the world. By chance, the trip I was on included Antarctica. I really didn't know much about Antarctica at the time but when we reached the Antarctic peninsula, I noticed a research hut and realized there were people who actually lived there.

That was all it took. I decided my next job was somehow going to be in Antarctica.”

“Somehow” is precisely the right word because the only people who work at the research stations are either scientific researchers or support staff including everything from carpenters to helicopter pilots. Teaching English as a second language is not a skill that's in demand. However, Johns found out about Port Lockroy, where every year (during the tourist season in summertime) four people work on the island. No shower. No toilet. Nothing that remotely resembles creature comforts— truly, just the basics. This group of four who begin as total strangers spend almost six months living in a modestly insulated hut. They alternate jobs cooking, cleaning, and emptying the “gash” (the toilet). But they are also living in the center of a gentoo penguin colony. In fact, the penguins nest

right under Johns's post office.

"I really don't think the average person can imagine what your life is like."

"Probably not. Unless they have been to Port Lockroy and know how beautiful it is. But that's just it, every day is so spectacular you really don't think about the little stuff."

Still, I want to know how Johns got the job.

"Hundreds of people apply every year and it took me three tries. Finally, they called me in for an interview. I think they were just getting tired of my applying."

"So, what kind of questions do they ask someone who wants to spend six months on a tiny island with three strangers and a windchill of twenty below?"

"I remember they asked what I would do if I needed to put up a tent with someone else, except one of us is blindfolded and the other is giving instructions. Once I heard the question, I realized this is exactly the type of thing I wanted to do."

I suspect Zawinski would be equally enthusiastic.

Johns worked in Port Lockroy for two years, or two seasons as the case may be, and then it was time to move on. I have been to Port Lockroy eight times, but like St Kilda—I just come and go. I am ever so grateful to return to the warmth of my cabin and a proper toilet. When pressed, Johns finally admits the only thing about living on Port Lockroy that gives her pause is cooking.

"Cooking is really my weak spot. I worry that no one will like my food. But so far, they have all survived so it must not be that bad."

Although it's not written in the job description, there are the occasional opportunities when a ship is at anchor to go aboard and grab a hot shower and a fresh croissant, which is how Johns became familiar with the expedition team and eventually got hired to work on the ship where she been for two years. But now it's time for



Hannah Johns on weed-whacking in Shackleton's cemetery

a change and Johns is returning to land. This season, she will be the post mistress in Grytvik-en, South Georgia, the former whaling capital but also where Sir Ernest Shackleton died and is buried. South Georgia is also the breeding grounds for the fur seal, whose undercoat was briefly used during a chapter in natural fiber history. (See *Wild Fibers*, Vol. 16). Johns is not a knitter; she often spends what little free time she has going for a run.

Working in South Georgia does not have the climatic challenges of Port Lockroy, during the summer season there is grass to be mowed. In fact, when Johns worked at the museum shop at Grytvik-en a few seasons back, she could be seen wearing red coveralls and protective goggles while weed-whacking Shackleton's grave.

How many people can put that on their CV?

Johns is reluctant to say one experience more memorable than the other. In her world, it's all outstanding. But she finally admitted that one afternoon, she had walked up to the church with guitar in hand to practice for the community Christmas service. The seal pups were just old enough to be curious and squirmed their way toward Johns, and so she did what any normal person would do—she sat down and sang to them.

If you happen to find yourself in South Georgia this season, stop by post office and give Johns a friendly hello. Like Zawinski, she is someone you could sit down and enjoy tea with for hours. You will instantly feel like an old friend.