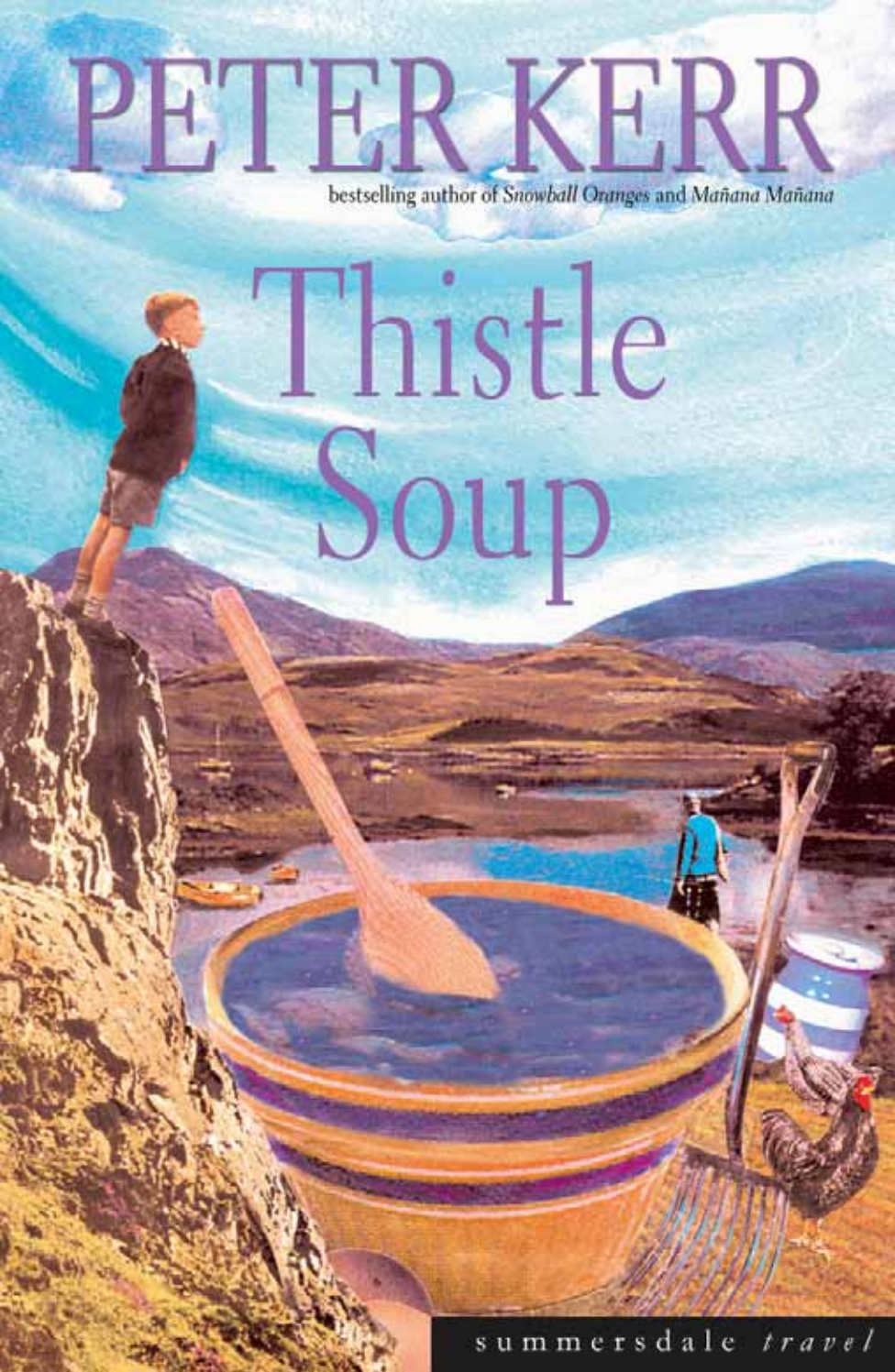


# PETER KERR

bestselling author of *Snowball Oranges* and *Mañana Mañana*

## Thistle Soup



summersdale *travel*

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Summersdale Publishers Ltd  
46 West Street  
Chichester  
West Sussex  
PO19 1RP  
UK

[www.summersdale.com](http://www.summersdale.com)

Printed and bound in Great Britain.

ISBN 1 84024 265 5

Book illustrated by Peter Kerr.  
Illustrations copyright Peter Kerr © 2002

Front cover illustration by Melanie Barnes.

A true Scot, Peter Kerr was born in Lossiemouth, Morayshire, and since his early childhood has spent most of his life in East Lothian. He is author of the bestselling Mallorca travelogues *Snowball Oranges* and WHSmith Travel Book Award shortlisted *Mañana, Mañana*. *Thistle Soup* is his third book.



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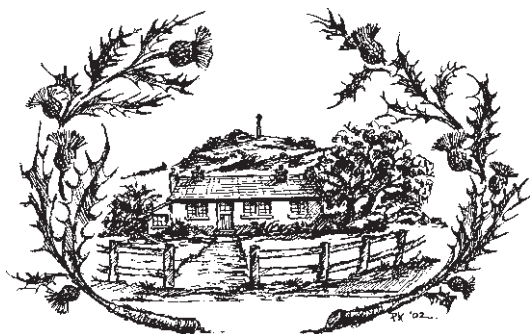
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To catch dame Fortune's golden smile,  
Assiduous wait upon her;  
And gather gear by every wile  
That's justified by honour;  
Not for to hide it in a hedge,  
Nor for a train-attendant;  
But for the glorious privilege  
Of being independent.

From 'Epistle To A Young Friend' – May 1786  
Robert Burns, 1759–96





## CHAPTER ONE

### LEANING AGAINST THE WIND

‘No enough purchase o’ the feet, that’s the problem,’ said Jimmy Walker, the County Council roadman responsible for maintaining the stretch of road running past the entrance to my grandparents’ farm near the market town of Haddington, about seventeen miles east of Scotland’s capital city. A summer shower had moistened the grass growing on the banked verge – long weedy grass, which Jimmy was busy cutting down with his scythe. And, despite Jimmy’s habitual assertion that his *tackety buits* gave him a *gran’ grip o’ the grun’*, the slippery underfoot conditions on this occasion had clearly showed scant respect for the ranks of hobnails glinting from the upturned soles of his boots while he floundered on his back in the bottom of the ditch.

‘Thoo’s no bad skaithed, is thoo, Cheemy?’ inquired my grandfather, reaching down on one knee to offer the old roadman a hand which, to me, looked like a number nine shovel with fingers.

Whether or not Jimmy had fully understood my

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grandfather's expression of concern, delivered in the lilting dialect of his native Orkney, I don't know, but he chuckled good-naturedly to himself as he clambered out of the ditch.

'Christ, ma erse is fair soakit!' he observed in the local East Lothian vernacular, then plucked the drenched dungaree cloth from the cleft of his backside. 'Need tae get the buits intae the cobbler's fur a new set o' tackets.'

My grandfather was laughing now too. 'Ya-a-as, she's a bugger when thoo hasno' enough purchase o' the feet, right enough, boy.' He produced a paper five-pack of Woodbine cigarettes from his waistcoat pocket, passing one of the infamous little 'coffin nails' to Jimmy, then cupping a thumbnail-ignited match between his huge hands while they both lit up.

'Aye, nothin' like kindlin' up a fag tae put a heat in ye when the water's runnin' oot the erse o' yer breeks,' Jimmy opined stoically. 'Ken what Ah mean, Tam?' Rheumy-eyed, he did his best to stifle a splutter as the stinging tobacco reek assaulted his lungs. 'Rare wee fags, the Woodbines, eh?'

Marvelling at the mysterious pleasure that both men were deriving from drawing deeply on their cigarettes, then cleverly exhaling the thick white smoke through flaring nostrils, I silently wished that I could join in the ritual. But, being not quite four years old, I'd have to wait a while yet. About a couple of months, as I remember.

My grandfather patted Jimmy's back. 'We'll leave thee tae get on with the work then, Cheemy. I'm away tae check the kye up the hill field.' Then he turned to me. 'Come now, peedie boy – we'll get Fanny tae give us a lift tae see the cattle beasts.'

'Peedie' is the Orkney word for 'small', so it followed that my grandfather should call me 'peedie boy'. He'd

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always done so, and I was used to it. The youngest of a line of three living Peters, I was also used to being called – originally to avoid confusion when we were all together – Wee Pete, Pedro, Young Pate (Pate is Scots for Pete), Patrick, Pat and even Paderooski (pronounced as spelt). In fact, it was reaching the stage when I would automatically answer to just about any name beginning with the letter ‘P’.

Fanny was a young Clydesdale mare, a gentle giant of an animal with the richest of bay coats, a narrow white blaze bisecting her face, and a kindly expression of eye that gave the clue to her disposition. She was my grandfather’s pride and joy. He had brought her down from Orkney along with the nucleus of his herd of Ayrshire milking cows just a few years earlier. My father remembers seeing him standing on the pier at Edinburgh’s port, long overcoat blowing in the wind, battered trilby pulled firmly down to his ears, while he supervised the unloading of a small tramp steamer that had been chartered to transport all his worldly possessions south from his native islands across well over two hundred miles of sea. Implements and crates were all marked in stencilled letters: *CARGO OF THOMAS MUIR – STROMNESS TO LEITH.*

He would only have been in his mid-fifties, I suppose, but seeming ancient in my three-year-old’s eyes. Though not a particularly big man, he was as strong as an ox, like most who had spent all of their lives since boyhood working with heavy horses. His favourite footwear, no matter what the weather, was a pair of old wellington boots, the tops turned down, and bought deliberately two sizes too big to accommodate a generous lining of straw.

‘Keeps the feet nice and dry on sweatin’ hot days, and nice and cosy when it’s cowl’d,’ was his way of looking at it.

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And his flat-cap ‘bunnet’ was another feature of his everyday apparel. I even recall him wearing it in bed when he was down with the flu one time, and I don’t remember ever seeing him without it on his head until many years later when he was hospitalised after being kicked in the face by one of his beloved horses. And he did have a face to match his personality; a strong-featured face, with a glint of humour in his eyes, but with a set to his jaw that told you he wouldn’t suffer fools gladly. He was a typical Orcadian, in fact; ruggedly durable in a way that reflects the climate of those windswept northerly isles, and with an underlying ‘don’t meddle with me’ look of honesty about him. He carried the pride of his Norse heritage quietly but unreservedly.

So, what had caused him to leave the large farm of Backaskaill on the island of Sanday to move lock, stock and barrel to this little farm, scarcely big enough to be viable, in a part of the country that he had never even visited before? To follow his family is the simple answer to that. His three daughters, my mother included, had had to leave Sanday when they reached the age of ten or eleven to attend the secondary school at Kirkwall on the Mainland island of Orkney, staying in lodgings and only returning home by steamer for school holidays three times a year. It must have been a traumatic wrench for young girls who had been brought up in the security of a farming family in a fine big house and with six hundred acres to roam over – including the wide, deserted expanse of the silver-sanded Backaskaill Bay. They would go to the parish school on horseback or by pony and gig every day, never thinking that such carefree times would ever end. But going away to secondary school was something which island youngsters like them just had

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to cope with eventually, and it would turn out to be an experience which no doubt helped develop their independence of character for later in life. They would never return to live on Sanday, for each one, on leaving school at the age of seventeen, would move south to Edinburgh or London to continue their respective education.

Then came the turn of the youngest child, Jim, my grandparents' only son and the apple of his mother's eye. What would life have been like on that fairly remote island for two middle-aged folk suddenly deprived of the last of their family? Not the sort of life that appealed to them, apparently. Backaskail was sold and they moved to a smaller farm known as 'Broomston' near the town of Stromness on Mainland Orkney. From Stromness Jim could make the daily fifteen-mile journey back and forth to school in Kirkwall. And so ended the family's generations-old association with the island of Sanday and the end of their tenure of a large farm that had been bought by the sweat and determination of James Muir, my great-grandfather. He, I believe, began adult life as a crofter, scraping a living on a little Sanday croft – or smallholding – called 'Lealand'.

I never knew my great-grandparents, as both had died many years before I was born. But I do have old sepia photographs of them – life-size head-and-shoulder studio portraits showing them stiffly posed in their Victorian Sunday best, their faces hand-tinted by the photographer, as was the fashion in those bygone days. James has a full beard, as was also in vogue back then, but you can see enough of his features to tell that he probably had a kindly nature. Yet he also has that no-nonsense look inherited by his son, although it's my great-grandmother, an elegantly good-looking woman, who has the same steely tenacity as

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my grandfather's burning in her eyes. It isn't hard to recognise in her facial expression the doggedness that would have been necessary to support and encourage her husband while attempting, against considerable odds, to improve his relatively modest station in life. She would have been the wind beneath his wings, I'm sure.

So, they augmented the subsistence livelihood gleaned from the croft by opening a small general store in a shed by the roadside; a farm shop a century or more before such agricultural diversification became the norm. And while his wife minded the store, my great-grandfather would travel the byways between the farms of Sanday with a horse-drawn van, selling the same produce as in the shop. Everything from milk to string and knitting needles, from potatoes to pots and pans, and even jams, bread and cheeses made by his wife in her 'spare time'. It must have been a hard life for them, particularly when bringing up a family of four young children as well. But they prospered, and by the time my grandfather left school at the age of twelve, his parents were already well established as the proprietors of the square mile of fertile land that constitutes Backaskaill Farm.

Even then, no business opportunity was neglected in order to mollify what we must presume was an extremely supportive bank manager. The sandy grass links that skirt the shoreline of Backaskaill Bay were riddled with rabbit warrens – a handy source of both food for the family and much needed extra income. Fishing, too, became part of a dramatically changed way of life from that which they had known at Lealand. Overlooking the sea as the farm did, it made good sense to harvest that as well. And yet no one in the family could swim, as is often the case with people who live by the shore and take to such treacherous seas in

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little boats. Another legacy of this family's seafaring Viking roots, perhaps.

Orkney, like its neighbouring archipelago of Shetland to the north, only became part of Scotland in what has been described as 'an unredeemed pawning operation' between the Scottish and Scandinavian crowns six hundred years ago. The Norsemen had ruled these islands for six centuries before that. And the fiercely independent Orcadians and Shetlanders have never been slow to recall this fact publicly whenever they feel they are being treated less than fairly by the British government. James III of Scotland 'lent' 58,000 florins to hard-up King Christian I of Denmark, Norway and Sweden as part of an arrangement which involved Christian's daughter Margaret becoming betrothed to James and the islands being 'mortgaged' to Scotland in lieu of a dowry; and those florins were never repaid. But, as the islanders warn the 'ferry-lowers' who rule their islands from the south, that's not to say that the money can't or won't be repaid yet – and by the islanders themselves! The temptation to do so when the riches of North Sea oil were discovered in their territorial waters must have been great.

According to my mother, the family flourished at Backaskaill and enjoyed a hard-working but idyllic lifestyle – everyone mucking in (the girls as well) to do what had to be done to run a large farm in one of the most exposed, but tranquil and unspoiled settings anywhere in the British Isles.

'The wind could be a nuisance, though,' she told me. 'But living on a low-lying island so far north on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, you soon get used to it. In fact, when the westerly gales howl in from Canada in winter, you can

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actually lean against the wind in Orkney – if you have the knack, that is. Otherwise you could end up landing on your bahookie in Norway!’

On moving to Broonstoon on the Mainland of Orkney, my grandparents found themselves in a very different farming environment from the one they’d enjoyed on Sanday. Broonstoon was a small dairy place, the farmers of which had traditionally provided milk for the population of Stromness. Which is precisely what my grandfather did – driving a horse and cart round the town delivering milk every day. He did all the work with the assistance of my grandmother, an educated woman, an ex-schoolteacher and accomplished musician, who, although a native of the Orkney island of Westray and well used to farm work, would have little expected in her middle years to be rising at five in the morning to hand-milk a herd of dairy cows every day. But she did so without complaint, and was destined to do likewise for many more years to come.

The blow came when their son Jim announced one day that he had no real interest in a farming future, and instead wanted to become an accountant. Naturally, this would involve leaving Orkney, just as his sisters had done before him. So, ultimately he moved to Edinburgh to commence an apprenticeship with an accountancy firm in the city. And my grandparents found themselves alone once more, the last of their offspring having flown the nest – for good, it seemed certain. They asked my mother to look for a farming foothold for them near Edinburgh. It was 1938 and the world was heading for another war – not the best of times, it could be said with some justification, to be upping sticks with a view to starting a new farming venture in a totally unfamiliar part of the country. But that’s precisely

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what they did, my mother having secured the tenancy of the fifty-acre Cuddy Neuk holding for them. Being an astute businessman, it may well have been my grandfather's hope to use the place merely as a stepping stone to a larger farm, once he'd found his feet within the East Lothian agricultural community, that is.

Then the war broke out and the county started to fill up with thousands of armed forces, all of whom would have to be fed; a commercial opportunity that my grandfather was quick to recognise. Farming was classified by the government as a Reserved occupation, freeing the participants from the requirement of being conscripted for military service. Jim was asked by his parents to resign his post with the accountancy firm and come to work with them at Cuddy Neuk. They were going to need all the help they could muster. It was a move that saved young Jim from being called up, it can't be denied, but it was also to prove the end of his budding career as an accountant and the start of a farming life in which his heart never truly belonged. But, to his eternal credit, when the fateful decision had to be made, he put family interests before his own.

'Steady there, Fanny lass,' my grandfather crooned to the young mare as he buckled the bridle onto that massive head of hers. Still murmuring soothing words, he backed her out of her stall and led her towards the stable door, her great shod feet clumping over the cobbles with a hollow metallic clatter. I watched the emergence of this magnificent giant from a safe position behind the horse trough outside in the yard.

It was then that Nellie the Border collie, as much a pet as a working dog (seldom a successful combination of occupations in that most intelligently-feisty of breeds!),

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decided to indulge her daredevil habit of nipping at the heels of animals big enough to kick her into orbit. Stallion, mare, bull or cow, it made no difference to Nellie – she had to make her presence felt whenever her master was handling these, to her, creatures of a lower order than either human or collie. The ‘I’m in charge’ trait of her breed was always in the forefront of Nellie’s hyperactive mind, ever ready to be triggered into suicidal action at even the most questionable of opportune moments.

Fanny knew Nellie well enough. They had grown up together at Broonstoon in Orkney and had even travelled down to Leith bunked together for company in the hold of the boat. Even now, Nellie spent her sleeping hours curled up in a straw-strewn corner of Fanny’s stall. They were chums. But, on this occasion, a slightly skittish streak in Fanny’s canny nature sparked a reaction to Nellie tugging at the long, silky feathers of her hind fetlocks. Whinnying in fright, she made a bolt for the stable door, rearing as she entered the yard, my grandfather holding on for dear life to her bridle while simultaneously hurling abuse and flailing welly-clad feet at his ‘bliddy eejit’ of a dog.

Then the strangest of things happened. He took a rag from his pocket and held it under Fanny’s muzzle for but the briefest of seconds. That seemed to steady her. Then he raised his lips to her face and said something. Only one word, I think, but said in such hushed tones behind a cupped hand that I couldn’t really hear. As if by magic, Fanny’s panic was dispelled and she stood absolutely still while my grandfather threw a sack over her back and lifted me up to sit astride the base of her powerful, curved neck. He stood on the horse trough to climb onto her back behind me, sitting sideways in the favoured way of horsemen of that

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era. Then, with a gentle clicking of his tongue and a flick of the rope reins, he coaxed the great animal into motion. 'Tschk, tschk! *Gid-up*, lass!'

A narrow dirt lane, known in these parts simply as 'the old road', runs at the foot of a long banking along the lower boundary of Cuddy Neuk, and gives access to all the fields. Bordered by the ubiquitous East Lothian hawthorn hedges, and dotted on either side by wind-bent trees, the old road stretches straight as a furrow for three-quarters of a mile to the entrance of the farthest field on the farm. It's said that it was originally a Roman way, then a coach road, linking up a bit farther west with the road from Edinburgh, and to the east with the ancient route to London which once ran along the spine of the Garleton Hills. Certainly, on this particular summer morning, with only the sound of birdsong competing with the steady thump of Fanny's hooves as we ambled along, it would have been easy to imagine a mail coach drawn by a team of horses lurching its dusty way towards us through the heat haze that shimmered over the surface of the road ahead. I didn't realise it then, of course, but I was sampling a way and pace of country life that would all too soon disappear forever.

'Had on tight, peedie boy,' my grandfather said when we finally made it to the farthest field gate. 'Had on tight *tae* Fanny's mane now.'

At that, he tugged on the left rein and dug the heels of his wellington boots into Fanny's flanks. '*Hie*, lass! *Hup* there!'

With a snort of compliance and a toss of her proud head, Fanny duly wheeled left and, putting on a spurt of speed, clambered sure-footed up the bank and through the gateway. Despite gripping the coarse hair of her mane with grimly-

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clenched fists, I think the sudden change in Fanny's gait and the consequent pecking motion of her head would have thrown me from her swaying withers (a fearsomely long way to the ground for a little sprog like me) had my grandfather not anticipated the likelihood and grabbed me firmly by the scruff of the neck.

'Thoo's safe enough, boy,' he laughed on hearing my involuntary squeak of panic. 'I'll look oot for thee – never fret.' He gave Fanny another dig in the ribs. 'Hup there, lass! *Hup* there!'

We entered a field of ripening oats, Fanny climbing the narrow headland between hedge and gold-green crop, making for the hill field that rose in rocky knowes up ahead. Because its craggy contours made cultivation difficult, the long-established turf which covered the hill field had escaped, thus far, the effects of the wartime government's subsidised 'Plough-up Policy', which encouraged farmers to turn over such old grassland in order to increase the nation's food-growing capacity. Its twelve acres provided the only permanent grazing on Cuddy Neuk, its elevated position making the hill field a healthy summer pasture for the farm's younger cattle – bullock stirks that would later be housed for fattening, and Ayrshire heifers which would one day join the milking herd as replacements for the older cows.

A gentle breeze drifted in from the west as we climbed higher, a whisper of warm air sighing through the tall oats, setting them swaying in waves which spread over the field like a meandering tide. The breeze also carried on its breath the first hint of the approaching harvest – a whiff of that soothing smell of dusty, ripe grain and sun-warmed straw that would soon pervade the surrounding countryside. In a