

# THE BLESSING OF BURNTISLAND

*Jenny Stanton*

KARNAC

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*To Katy and Rebecca Beinart  
artists and daughters*



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This story grew from a news cutting about a dowser working with wreck seekers and naval archaeologists to locate *The Blessing of Burntisland*, but all the characters and events in this novel are products of the author's imagination, as can be guessed from Joe Fairlie's visions of the two seventeenth-century survivors. Passages in the past use occasional unfamiliar words, such as "chimestrie" (a forerunner of our "chemistry"), where these help to convey a slightly different usage; in the manuscript sections, a far freer spelling is allowed, as there was no standardized spelling at that time.

For reading and offering feedback on various drafts, I am indebted to Anne Church Bigelow, John Marzillier, Katy Darby, Tony Richardson, Peter and Lesley Adamson, Julie Greenwood, Fiona Richardson, and Gabrielle Townsend. I am grateful to Michael Pushkin for notes on the view of Burntisland from the train; to Ben Hebbert of the Bate Collection of musical instruments in Oxford for information on early modern trumpets; and to the Jupiter Trust for a dowsing expedition to the Rollright Stones which gave me a flavour of what I was writing about. Thanks to Maggie Pelling for guidance about Munk's Roll and fevers—but all errors and inventions relating to the history of medicine, as with the rest, are my own work.

For further information about dowsing in the UK, visit [www.britishdowsers.org](http://www.britishdowsers.org).

Readers interested in the Digger movement are strongly recommended to seek out Gerrard Winstanley's writings, which inspired Thomas Newbolt in this story. For Thomas's partner Susan's involvement in the women's march to Parliament, complete with sea-green ribbons, I'm indebted to H. N. Brailsford, *The Levelers and the English Revolution* (first published 1961, ed. Christopher Hill, Spokesman, Nottingham, 1983, pp. 316–317).

The M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art, Kaunas, Lithuania, kindly provided a reproduction of the painting by M. K. Čiurlionis, *Jūros Sonata* (Sonata of the Sea) (Andante, 1908), photographed by Arūnas Baltėnas, for the front cover. I am grateful to Adrienne Rich and to W. W. Norton of New York for permission to reproduce the five lines from "Diving into the Wreck" which appear at the beginning of this book.

I'd like to thank Oliver Rathbone at Karnac Books for opening an opportunity for works of fiction, among Karnac's mainly non-fiction list on psychology—in this case not entirely unrelated, as Joe, my fictional dowser, might say.

I came to explore the wreck.  
The words are purposes.  
The words are maps.  
I came to see the damage that was done  
and the treasures that prevail.

—“Diving into the Wreck” by Adrienne Rich





## CHAPTER ONE

As the launch pattered and bobbed across the open waters of the Firth of Forth, I focused my inner eye on my mental image of the wreck. There was *The Blessing of Burntisland* herself, a barge like a small sailing ship; there were King Charles's tapestries, silver plate, and paraphernalia; and there was the small matter of thirty unlucky crew and servants who had gone down with the boat. Only two survivors, identities unknown; perhaps surprising that there were any. No life-jackets in those days. Along with the half-dozen salvage crew, I was kitted out with a bulgy yellow number that I found very reassuring.

If I felt a twinge of unease, I pushed it to one side. Concentration was crucial.

My outer eyes were fixed on my pendulum, a honey-glazed ceramic bead the size of a large cherry, dangling from my fingers on a piece of nylon twine. Perched on the bench near the stern, I had developed a sitting sea-jig, my body moving with the boat, my arm and hand increasingly steady. My knuckles were raw from the sea breeze blowing up the firth from the east, but I scarcely noticed the cold.

The moment came: my bead was no longer swaying with the boat's motion, but starting to circle. My hair, buffeted across my forehead, stung my eyes. Waves slapped the launch. I leaned

forward, holding the string, the backdrop to the bead veering from grey-green choppy water, to varnished rail, to cream-painted bulwark. The bead's circling, small and tentative at first, grew into a definite orbit. To me, that dance of recognition is always a dance of delight, like opening your hands and releasing a moth that spirals round rather than flying off. The men gathered near me to witness it, apart from one who had taken over the helm and was busy keeping the launch in one place.

"She's right here, under this spot," I yelled into the wind.

It was not such a great revelation. I had been through the whole process before, on paper. My bread-and-butter skill is treasure dowsing on whatever site I'm called to, using my rods and pendulum, but my special skill is map dowsing, which I do in the privacy of my own room—in this case, a boarding-house room, for they had insisted I come up to Edinburgh to consult. I'd given Healey and McKee the co-ordinates and suggested that would be the end of my role, but they insisted I should confirm my finding with on-the-spot dowsing this time. Fair enough; my first offering had been a dud, too far off the presumed route of *The Blessing of Burntisland*. I had been reluctant to join them out on the firth, because dowsing on water is always a tricky business. Worse than that, I objected to the smack of mascot or hired performer. But they were paying well, and they needed my definite confirmation.

McKee was broaching a bottle of single malt to celebrate. Bit premature, before the dive and further checks, but I wasn't going to quibble. The circling of my pendulum was proof enough for me—and for them—that we had indeed found the wreck. For a brief moment, I shared the elation of the wreck seekers.

Before I could stow my pendulum and reach out for my share of whisky, everything suddenly dimmed. My head felt squeezed, and there was an intolerable pressure behind my eyes. And then, it was momentarily as though I were under the waves, another person, in another time.

*Wrap your legs around my waist, boy. I have to think the instruction and hope you hear me without speech. Your arms around my neck do not feel security enough for your salvation, as I struggle to beat upwards in this evil element.*

*Strange, that sliver of shining stuff that slices gently towards us. It cannot be—yes, as it touches your outstretched foot and glances off, in another downward slide, I sense it is indeed one of the great salvers. How it*

*remained above us whilst all else was carried below I cannot tell. Unless one of the chests lingered awhile then burst open. As mine will surely do, any moment.*

"Here, you've dropped it," said McKee, bending down to reclaim my pendulum from the deck. His face darkened and I could feel him thinking, "Ill omen." He handed me my tot in a small steel beaker. "Get that down your neck, Fairlie," he insisted. "You look like you could do wi' it. Sea's getting to you now, eh?"

I nodded, dumb, pocketed the pendulum and knocked back the whisky.

It was not seasickness. It was another, stranger queasiness. There was no temptation to tell my companions what had just happened. It had felt as though I were in the freezing water, desperately struggling to hold my breath. Yet, it was not I myself down there.

The others were whooping with excitement, making reckless predictions of how the world's socks would be knocked off when the wreck was raised. I shook my head, which reacted with a jarring pain as if it would crack in two.

"Don't be so sure," I said.

They turned and stared at me as one man, swaying and open-mouthed.

"You said this was the spot," growled Healey, who was usually most amicable. He sounded like an Alsatian whose bone you had tried to grab.

"It is, I'm sure of that. But there's no guarantee the wreck can be raised. And maybe she's best left in peace. You know—ghosts and curses of the long dead."

What I had just experienced might have been a strange fit, but the shock felt so real I could not ignore it. If it meant anything at all, it must be a warning, since it left me with such an overpowering sense of dread.

Momentarily, as I woke in the dark of the night in my narrow Edinburgh guest-house bed, I sensed that elation of the find, which is more appropriate to my land work, where the treasure is quickly exhumed to confirm my dowsing. "The cock-a-hoop feeling," my Dad used to call it, and I'd imagine my older sister Jeannie's green hula-hoop, hanging from a beam in the shed, with a cockerel standing inside it crowing. Within seconds, tonight's cock-a-hoop was knocked off its perch by a scaly monster that landed on my back and

dug its talons in and squeezed me till dawn. My guts went into coils, my heart beat fifteen to the dozen, my breath refused to go deeper into my chest than about my collarbones. I christened my tormentor: The Dread.

The long drive home to Bishop's Stortford calmed me down. Things always seemed worse in the night, I told myself; there was nothing to be afraid of. My underwater vision of the two survivors was vivid, but not as real as it felt, and the physical sensations had been a side-effect of seasickness.

Sure enough, everything felt normal at home. I settled back into the humdrum of odd dowsing jobs. I had on my books a woman who had lost track of the mains water stopcock in her front yard—that would take me all of ten minutes, but she lived out at Thaxted, so I'd been putting her off—and a retired vicar who was convinced there was a crosier buried in the crumbling graveyard of the old church where he used to serve, down in Kent. In the weeks before Christmas there tends to be a lull. Between these excitements, I paid visits to my local pub to mull over the world's ills, and sat for soothing hours at the bench in my shed, working on my long-term project.

It seemed that the only aftermath of my expedition to Scotland was the cheque, which arrived a fortnight later, accompanied by a terse note. Healey's writing was incomprehensible, so I took the note down the pub to get it deciphered by Jack, who was helping me celebrate the cheque. Jack is a plasterer by trade, but he has a special interest in handwriting. Not calligraphy. The one where you read people's characters from their writing. Graphology. He told me Bernie Healey was dogged, optimistic, warm-hearted, and had a touch of the visionary about him. I told him he was right, although I had the same characteristics and my writing is a damn sight more legible, and did he mind getting on with the job or my warm-heartedness might evaporate. So he translated:

Dear Fairlie,

We sent down a diver three days after our outing. Why did you rush off like a blue-arsed fly? You should have been there when the lad touched wood. Payment encl.

Yrs, Bernard Healey.

"What the hell does he mean, 'touched wood', do you suppose?" Jack asked when he'd worked out all of the wording. He'd come

straight from work and his hair was soured with pinkish-white powder. It made him look twice his age, till you saw the smoothness of his face. He's actually thirty-seven, five years less than me, but when he's cleaned up people take him for even younger.

Touch wood. The feebleness of our attempts to ward off nemesis. I thought of The Dread, of bad luck conjured by tampering with what's dead and buried beneath the sea and the silt of centuries. With an effort and a swig of bitter, I pushed those thoughts aside. "What he means is, the diver touched a bit of the wreck."

Jack gave a low whistle. "So that means you were proved right? And now they can haul her up and polish up the king's silver. Will they give you a cut?"

"Yes and no. I was right, but it will take months for them to double-check. I told you, Healey's lot are in with the Navy in the search? The Navy got stuck, that's why they called me in. But now the naval archaeologists will want to use all their scientific gear to explore the spot, so as not to rely on the word of a weirdo like me. When they do confirm that the wreck is *The Blessing of Burntisland*, they may have difficulty raising her. And I won't get a cut anyway, this cheque is it. I've told you before, it doesn't work if I dowse for treasure for myself."

"So why were you so chuffed about finding the wreck?"

"The glory."

Whether Jack understood that concept or not, he shut up when I offered to refill his glass.

Healey called me up just a week into the new year.

"Joe," he said, after we'd exchanged good wishes, "you've got to come up to Scotland again."

My stomach clenched. "What's up?"

"We're holding a press conference in Fife. It'd be great to have you there."

I was bemused. "A press conference. What for?"

"To announce we've found *The Blessing of Burntisland*, of course."

"It's as definite as that?"

"I told you in my letter. We sent down a diver."

"Yes, and he found timber. But that doesn't prove the identity of the wreck."

"C'mon Joe, what's this nonsense? You set out to locate her, you've found her, why so sceptical all of a sudden?"

It was a tribute, them wanting me there. Often, customers don't want to know you, once you have found them what they are after.

This was by far the biggest find of my entire life. Yet I declined, as politely as I could. I thought if I stayed at home, I could evade The Dread. Not that it was entirely working, so far. I still awoke, from nightmares in the dark, or in the morning, choking in the grip of a scaly monster, my heart hammering away, and my mouth dry with fear. But it eased off quicker than it had in the Edinburgh guest-house.

The press conference—which I took no notice of—was on a Friday. Next morning, I was digging my vegetable plot in a nice effortful rhythm, musing on my strange experience over the wreck, when the question occurred: Who was he, the person whose head I seemed to occupy in that vision? A bout of queasiness hit me, making me drop the spade. At the same time, the garden turned misty and the light faded. Part of my mind hoped there was an eclipse starting, which I had failed to hear about because I don't follow the news much. I glanced up towards the sun; it was shrouded by thin cirrus. I gave an involuntary shudder, and then for the second time I was seized.

*Through the eye-holes in my leather mask I gaze out above the crowd. The faces seem like wavelets on the sea, and the deep tolling of the bell like the tolling of a ship's bell. I must rally. Now, on the scaffold, beside the block; there is something I have to do presently. The guards escort the King out from the Banqueting Hall where the lords and ladies are gathered, out through the embrasure where they have removed the window, and I am struck by how small he seems. Our eyes meet, though thank God he cannot properly see mine. Only once before have I seen that look in the King's eyes—when was it, and where? He is speaking now but I do not follow his words, which are but a praise of his own righteousness.*

*The lapping of waves confuses my senses, the platform beneath my feet is the deck of the King's ship, the Dreadnought, soon after the Blessing went down, and I stand shivering with the message I have to bring him.*

*With a start, I shake myself into the present. No, it is not yet my turn; the priest hovers close, the final prayer is muttered. A traitor-priest, in Charles's eyes, and I the traitor-physician, did he but know. The executioner at least is no traitor, merely performing his given function. The King kneels. High swings the axe, high in the grey sky. Down with a juicy thud, just such as you hear every day at the butcher's block. Thank God, no need for a second stroke.*

*It's amazing how much, how fast it flows, as if a mere man contained a river, an ocean of the stuff. Having me check the body for signs that all vital force has left is mere farce, and I perform the task in the most perfunctory fashion. My role would have been larger had the executioner bungled his part. Now the worst: I hold up the gory head by its locks, for the crowd to see. The myriad faces, that seemed a moment ago like the dancing waves, are still. There is an awed hush.*





## CHAPTER TWO

I did consider consulting a doctor, or even a psychiatrist. But what could I say that would not sound crazy? Perhaps I could have saved others and myself a deal of trouble by seeking a cure at that early stage. But later, there was proof these were not mere brainstorms. So, who knows?

I consulted Emma, instead. It was no good turning to my sister Jeannie, Emma's mum; she was always, unreservedly, on my side, but she called my hunches "superstitious nonsense". I had inherited my dowsing skills from Dad, as well as some of the insight, or second sight, from Gran, but Jeannie had missed out on both, poor thing. Emma, like her mum, lacked the special abilities, but she had more time for my dowsing and other stories. Plus, she had a degree in history of art and worked in the museum services, in London. Because I'd helped out with baby-sitting when she was a toddler, we had a special uncle-niece relationship.

I phoned Emma the day after my vision of the execution. Early, before she went out to play squash. Where she lives, there are no decent places to go for walks, so she has to throw herself about indoors to keep fit.

"Hello darling, how are you?"

"I'm good, Uncle Joe. Yourself?"