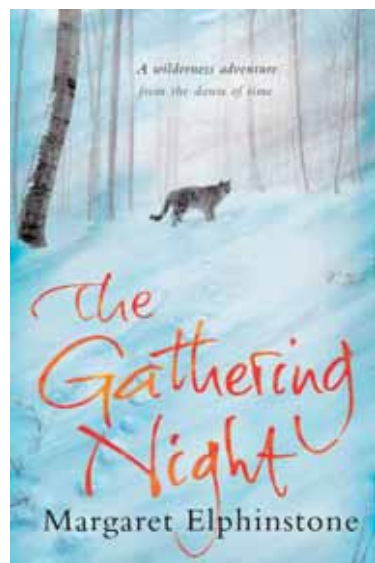


STORY HUNTER



Margaret Elphinstone on the coracle she made while researching her latest book



New Galloway-based author Margaret Elphinstone's latest novel brings the hunter-gatherer people of Mesolithic Scotland back to life, she tells **Mary Smith**

Photography by **Phil Rigby**

New Galloway-based author Margaret Elphinstone loves the research which precedes the writing of her novels and believes in doing her homework thoroughly. While researching for her latest historical novel, Margaret – one of Scotland's foremost women writers – learned about edible roots and berries, how to harvest wild honey and to knapp flint. She also talked to deer stalkers and poachers. And she didn't just read about how coracles were made, she built her own, using hazel and willow and a cow hide.

Her new novel, *The Gathering Night*, published this month, is about a band of Mesolithic hunter-gatherers living 8,000 years ago in what is now Scotland. These people left little trace of their existence, but one event is known to have occurred. Around 6150 BC,

a tsunami hit Scotland – and this is the catalyst for the plot of *The Gathering Night*.

Between Grandmother Mountain and the cold sea, Alaia and her family live off the land. When one of her brothers goes hunting and never returns, the fragile balance of life is upset. Half-starved and maddened with grief, Alaia's mother follows her visions and goes in search of her lost son. Then a stranger from a rival tribe appears on their hearth seeking shelter. Are his stories of a great wave and a people perished really to be believed? What else could drive a man to travel alone between tribes in the depth of winter?

Hopes of resolution come when Alaia's mother returns home as a Go-Between, one able to commune with the spirits. But as all the Auk people come together for their annual Gathering Night, who there will listen

to the voice of a woman?

The Gathering Night is a story of conflict, loss, love, adventure and devastating natural disaster. This utterly enchanting prehistorical novel is set deep in our stone-age past, but resonates as a parable of our troubled planet 8,000 years on.

Margaret Elphinstone began her writing career while living in Laurieston in the Eighties. She left to teach Scottish Literature and then women's writing at Strathclyde University before becoming professor of writing. But she never lost her love for the region and, towards the end of last year when she took early retirement, she returned immediately to the area.

"Before I started on *The Gathering Night* I didn't know anything about Mesolithic peoples' lives and when I began to read and ask questions, it seemed I was not alone in not knowing," she says. "I found that almost every book on pre-history gave only a brief mention of hunter-gatherers, despite the fact they occupied the country for around 7,000 years.

"Of course, once you start, you find the people who study the Mesolithic period and are experts in their field. They provided me with a huge amount of help and advice.

"What I find amazing is how Mesolithic people left the land pretty much as they found it. In fact they changed the land minimally, compared to everyone else. They had an affinity with the land."

Margaret researched hunter-gatherer communities across the world, with visits to Lapland, Greenland and North America. She also took part in archaeological digs, including a Mesolithic site on Coll. On an Orkney dig she found a roasted hazelnut shell which, when carbon dated, proved that humans had reached these islands much earlier than had been thought.

She studied hunter-gatherer crafts and skills, some, of course, such as fishing, stalking and hunting, still known today: "I talked to stalkers who told me about wearing heather in their hats, how to smell the deer, keeping upwind of them – the same things the hunter-gatherers would have known and done. I was also given some discreet introductions to poachers, who really know all about hunting.

"People were very helpful. There's a duck hunting scene in the novel where the dogs lead ducks into traps – the ducks just follow the dogs – and a man called Eric Begbie from Clackmannan was able to advise me on this. Enid Brown, a bee expert in Fife, worked out how to collect wild honey, which also happens in the book."

The novel contains many mouthwatering scenes of food being cooked: deer, duck, bear, wild cattle and pig, and salmon, trout and shellfish. There was also a wide variety of nuts, berries and edible roots. "Lily roots are enormous," says Margaret. "One would easily feed a family and there were sea roots such as sea beet, which can still be found

along the shore today.

"Recent hunter-gatherer people lived well in marginal areas where agriculture is not possible and the Inuit, for example, operate in extreme conditions, so somewhere in Argyll the people probably lived very well. The hunters would perhaps have three hard, intense days then a week of not having to do anything."

In the afterword to her novel, Margaret points out that evidence suggests that, far from being the stereotype of grunting cavemen, Mesolithic people "could make decisions about their lives, just as we do, based on social and spiritual considerations, and not just the material imperatives of where and how to find the next meal."

Margaret also attempted many of the crafts the Mesolithic people would have used.

"We talk about stone age people because the evidence is stone. Although there is no evidence of it, we can hazard pretty good guesses about how hunter-gatherers used wood, basket and skin," she says. "I went on a coracle-making course in Shropshire with Peter Faulkner. There's an abattoir next door so he has a ready supply of skins.

"My coracle's skin is a cross Hereford. It was a wonderful course and gave me a real feel for the materials. Caroline Wickham Jones, a Mesolithic archeologist on Orkney, taught me how to knapp flint. I did it very badly but again, it let me understand how it felt to do it."

In the novel, the Auk people have come together for their annual gathering and characters each tell the story of events since the strangers came. The Go-Betweens are people who can communicate with the spirits and are rooted in the research and reading Margaret has done on shamanistic religions from around the world.

She says hunter-gatherer cultures share remarkably similar spiritual practices all over the world: "It's fascinating to learn about their healing and social control methods and I am trying to get across that the world view of the hunter-gatherers was so different from ours. They're telling their own story – it's a collective paradigm so nothing is unreal. Telling the truth makes total sense to their community."

Margaret has been invited to give readings from *The Gathering Night* and to talk about researching a Mesolithic novel at a number of festivals, including the Edinburgh International Book Festival this summer. The Galloway launch of her book takes place at The CatStrand in New Galloway on Friday, June 5 at an 'In Conversation' event with Tom Pow, head of Creative and Cultural Studies at the Glasgow University Crichton Campus. She will be signing copies of *The Gathering Night* after the talk.

■ *The Gathering Night* is published by Canongate Books and costs £12.99