



## The Redemption of Alexander Seaton

*Shona MacLean*

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Is the young man merely drunk or does his tottering walk suggest something more sinister? When he collapses in front of two sisters on that dark, wet night, they guess rightly that he's been murdered by poisoning. So begins this tale set in the town of Banff, Scotland in the 1620s.

## **The Redemption of Alexander Seaton Details**

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Author : Shona MacLean

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## **From Reader Review The Redemption of Alexander Seaton for online ebook**

### **Sarah Knowler says**

This is the book that first pulled me away from Wolf Hall - I know, amazing - but then sent me back to it with renewed enthusiasm. Before I reached the point of trailing WH around with me like a comfort blanket (I'm there now), I felt lazy one day and picked this up rather than walk upstairs. Very soon Alexander Seaton had grabbed me. I found myself wondering about him while not reading. The plot and setting reminded me of the books I loved as a child: Kidnapped, Moonfleet, Lorna Doone. It reminded me to be an active reader and not just a constant one. Thank you Shona MacLean. I shall look out for more of your books.

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### **Cristina says**

This was a solid and enjoyable historical mystery set in Scotland in 1626. The main hero, Alexander Seaton, is a disgraced would-be minister of the Church of Scotland who is obsessed with guilt and tormented by his lack of faith. He's certainly a compelling character and I grew to like him more and more as the novel proceeded and his past history is slowly clarified. His change of outlook throughout the book is depicted in a subtle and very convincing manner.

The murders at the heart of the story are sufficiently mysterious to keep the reader interested but what I really appreciated in this book was the stifling atmosphere with which the author depicted the town of Banff. Sin, witchcraft, isolation and the Devil himself seem to inhabit the narrow and dark alleyways of the town. The characters must move in this world with care and suspicion and things and people are not always what they seem to be. And it is indeed in the details - looked at but not really seen until the end of the book - that the story finds its solution and real meaning.

The writing style is rich and layered, full of interesting references to Scottish language and culture.

Very nice!

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### **Marguerite Kaye says**

3.5-4 stars, I couldn't decide.

This was a slow burn of a novel. The setting, Banff in the reign of James VI and I, was extremely unusual, and as a result, it took me a while to get accustomed to the various characters and their place in the town - which really mattered. Alexander Seaton though, I warmed to right away. He's a fallen angel of a man, a man with a real and genuine calling in a world of hypocritical religious zealots, who has fallen from grace rather spectacularly and publicly. Rather than pick himself up, he wears a metaphorical hair shirt and takes every opportunity he can to do himself down, despite the fact that he's clearly one of the few men of integrity in the book. But once I got to grips with the rest of the cast, Alexander wasn't the only character I warmed to - or heartily disliked! It really is a question of persisting, because the rewards are there, in this rich, multi-layered story.

This is a murder mystery. It's also an allegory that could easily be fitted to any number of times and situations, and in that sense it reminded me of Margaret Atwood's Handmaid's Tale - a chilling lesson. But it's also a brilliantly drawn and evocative account of life in an obscure corner of Scotland at a less glamorous period of history.

So why not more stars? Because I did have to work hard at it for a good half of the book. It's not a story you can pick up and put down easily, and there are times when I felt that there was simply too much description - when Alexander journeys from Banff to Aberdeen, for example, I could have done without the street by wynd by vennel directions (which I also hated in the first Peter May book). So different. And rewarding. And I'm glad I read it. The next one is set in Northern Ireland though, and I'm not so sure I fancy that, which is a shame.

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### **Cheryl says**

Nice historical mystery, even though the historical aspect was minimal. It was an interesting story and it kept me interested until the end, even though the answer to the Mystery was revealed early on through the clues. I will be trying this author again.

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### **Leah says**

#### **An excellent beginning...**

A storm is raging in Banff in the north-east of Scotland as Alexander Seaton makes his way home from the inn so, when he sees a man staggering in the street, Alexander assumes he is the worse for drink and hurries on by to get out of the rain. When the man's dead body is found the next day in the schoolroom where Alexander teaches, his feelings of guilt are compounded when his friend Charles Thom is arrested for the murder. Convinced of Charles' innocence, Alexander sets out with his old friend and mentor, Dr Jaffray, to find out who really murdered Patrick Davidson.

The book is set in 1626, a time when an uneasy peace holds sway in Scotland. All those pesky 16th century Queens are dead and the crowns of Scotland and England are united, though not yet their parliaments. The Protestants are in the ascendancy and the Kirk has a stranglehold on religion and morality, but the Catholics are still plotting, and looking to the great Catholic countries of Europe for support. And witch-hunting is still at its peak, led and encouraged by the more rabid members of the hellfire-and-damnation Kirk, often culminating in public burnings. Happy days!

MacLean has caught the feel of this time-period just about perfectly in my opinion. She gives the impression of knowing the history inside-out and her characters ring true as people living in this time. Seaton and Jaffray are on the more enlightened side, though of course the actual Enlightenment is still some way off, but MacLean doesn't fall into the trap of giving them anachronistically modern viewpoints. So, for example, while being horrified at the attitude of the mob to witch-burnings, they're not quite ready to deny the possibility of witchcraft and consorting with the Devil.

Seaton is the first-person, past-tense narrator of the story and he is a great main character. Destined to be a minister in the Kirk, some event happened that led to his disgrace and he is now back in his home town

working as an undermaster in the local school. While his one or two true friends have stood by him, many of the rest of the goodly people of the town treat him almost as a social outcast and his own feelings of guilt have brought him close to despair. The reader doesn't find out what the event was until well on into the novel, but as Seaton gets involved in the investigation into Patrick Davidson's death, he begins to feel again that his life may have some purpose beyond his failed calling to the ministry.

The plot is complex but entirely credible, leading the reader merrily up several false trails along the way. The quality of the writing is excellent and the characterisation throughout is very strong, not just of the main players but of the secondary characters too. And the wide-ranging nature of the plot allows MacLean to show something of the politics and religion of the time without ever resorting to information dump. There's almost a feeling of a coming-of-age story to it, as the initially fairly naive Seaton begins to learn about some of the undercurrents in this seemingly so respectable society.

The plot and some of the occurrences make this far too strong to be considered a cosy, but it avoids graphic violence and gore, and is mercifully free of foul language and sex scenes. For the non-Scots out there, it's also free of dialect – standard English throughout but for the very occasional specifically Scottish word, for which a short glossary is included at the back.

An excellent historical crime novel, well up there with the likes of *Brother Cadfael*, and the joy of it is it's the first in a series. Highly recommended - the second one has already been added to my TBR.

[www.fictionfanblog.wordpress.com](http://www.fictionfanblog.wordpress.com)

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### **Diana Sandberg says**

Very good. Setting – Banff, Scotland, 1626. Our protagonist is a young man with a deeply troubling past. He is working as a schoolmaster but we soon find out he was almost made a minister of The Kirk until something terrible happened. He is, to some extent, pulled from his despair by the shocking death of a young relative of the provost of the town and the arrest of one of his own few friends for the deed. This is a tale well told. I enjoyed the setting and the characters and did not guess the malefactor's identity. The personal, social and political expressions of the religious intensity of the times are excellently presented and very absorbing.

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### **Charlie says**

Book Riot Read Harder 2017: #9

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### **Margareth8537 says**

Audiobook read by Crawford Logan  
Interesting book, with some good characterisation.

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### **Marièle says**

I was curious about this writer since Scotland has recently become my new literary focus. I don't usually read crime novels, but the abstract of this book sounded interesting. However, to me, the story did not have a great deal of Scottish flavour. It's a historical crime novel that takes place in a town by the sea; the story includes murder, superstition, religious fervour, and a public frenzy that leads to a witch hunt. Thus, the plot could be taking place in any coastal European town at that time. It also took me quite some time to find my way through the abundance of minor characters.

Nevertheless, I would probably read the second instalment of the series to see how Alexander Seaton develops. He was an authentic character with an interesting dark secret, which unfolded slowly. I was hoping that the love story loop would somehow be closed at the end though, but it didn't. Ah well, maybe in the next book (but it doesn't look like it...).

Overall, I thought that the novel was well-written, well-paced and suspenseful, even though the crime's denouement was a bit conventional. The historical details were understated but effective, and the intensity of the religious and political pressures of the time were perceptible.

This is somewhere between 3 and 4 stars.

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### **Chris Stanley says**

Wow What a fantastic thriller - I'd give it six stars! This is the best book I've read in years. The characters are likeable and realistic the plot excellent and the storytelling superb. I will be reading the sequel soon!

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### **Helen says**

I was going to hold back with reviewing this book until after the Book Discussion group had, well, discussed it. But as some of us have already rated and posted, I thought I would do the same.

I started off with huge optimism; my sort of novel - good time, setting and premise for a captivating read. By the time I was half way through I wished all the characters would be swept away never to be seen again. The 'hero' was pious, self-pitying and in need of a good slapping. Some had identical surnames which was confusing. Did the author have such a small choice of names or did she want us to assume some relationship?

The story then veered off track to another to do with map drawing. This seemed to have no apparent purpose at all. Apologies but for me this was a very black and white book that had no colour in it and failed to ignite any of my usual overactive imagination.

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### **Caty Toward says**

Loved it!

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## P.D.R. Lindsay says

'The Redemption of Alexander Seaton'

by Shona MacLean. Quercus, 2008, paperback: 408 pages, ISBN: 978-1- 84724-791-9

Shona MacLean's novel beat mine in the Crime Writers Association Debut Dagger competition a few years ago. When her novel was published, a couple of years later, and it was Quercus publishing her, who had turned me down too, well, I had to read it to see what made her novel so instantly acceptable to the Lords and Masters of traditional publishing. She'd chosen to write about 17th C Scotland and it's not an easy period to write about. 17th Century British History gets bogged down in people's minds as the English Civil War and the Restoration of Charles Stuart, other fascinating things which happened in Britain then are obscured by Cavaliers and Roundheads. Readers have an image of a King from Scotland, wide brimmed feathered hats and tin pot helmets as the entire 17th C. Ms MacLean puts the kibosh on that notion, transporting the reader, with an accomplished writer's skill, into a Scotland which is all that one learned to associate with John Nox. John Knox, the disapproving minister (never say priest) with his anti-popery, anti Catholic, almost puritan Presbyterians, his fierce denunciation of anything which might appear to be enjoyable, and his set task as a thorn in the side of Mary, Queen of Scots. It is not a world we are familiar with.

Historical novels need to make the historical period they are set in almost a character. This way the reader gets the most out what can sometimes be a challenging read. Lovers of historical novels want a taste of another world, an historical world with the smells and sights and sounds of the past made real for them.

Shona MacLean shows us Banff in 1626. Bleak, dour and conformist, yet that is a superficial judgement. The characters, the people she created, might be solemn and serious, for they believe in their way of life, but they can laugh too. They have fought hard for their religious freedom, and the rights they have they hold. Ms MacLean takes us into their 17th C mind-set and never once do her characters slip into modern thought. It's a remarkable feat for a first novel and does add another dimension of reality to her Banff in 17th C Scotland. It is not a place we would call remotely modern.

'The Redemption of Alexander Seaton' is the first of her novels about Alexander Seaton, (there are three now,) and is a stunning historical read. Alexander Seaton is in need of redemption. He is now the local schoolmaster. A clever man, who took his degree with honours, he looked forward to his election to the kirk and travelling to the European universities. When he stood to give his test speech before the Ministers of the Church he was denounced as unfit by the local Lord of the Manor. Shattered, lost, without direction, though not friendless, he sank into depression and lethargy from which it seemed he might never recover. Then on a stormy night the apothecary's assistant is found dead in the schoolroom, his schoolroom. It is clear the assistant was poisoned. Seaton is not accused because he has an alibi of sorts, but his friend, Charles Thom, does not, and is accused of the murder. For the first time Alexander has something to fight for. He must find out what really happened and save his friend from the hangman. Encouraged by his mentor, Dr Jaffray, and the baillie, (Banff town Magistrate) William Buchan, Alexander begins to untangle what looks like treason, spying and a Catholic plot. In doing so he also untangles some of the guilt and despair which have crushed him. In saving Charles, he sets his own feet back on the path to self respect.

'The Redemption of Alexander Seaton' is a satisfying, enjoyable read. Do start with it and then go on to 'A Game of Sorrows' which has Alexander adventuring in Ireland, in Ulster where his mother came from. The latest novel, 'Crucible of Secrets' which I have just finished, is set again in Aberdeen and Banff. All three books are well written, challenging, entertaining and a pleasure to read.

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### **Mary Arkless says**

Set in Banff, Aberdeenshire, and Aberdeen in 1626, the story begins with the murder of a young man. It is told by a man who had worked hard to become a minister, but was denounced at the last moment. He was wracked with self-loathing and shame, and treated by most he encountered daily as a greatly fallen man, a sinner of the worst type. This is the Alexander Seaton of the title. His friend is accused of the murder, and Seaton knows his friend did not do it. Can he prove it in time?

It took a while for me to get into this book, but once it took off, I didn't want to put it down. There are some nice twists in this tale.

Borrowed from the library. Recommended by Pam.

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### **Graham Fi says**

What a brilliant read. Nothing better than a good historical Novel. Even better when set near your own home town.

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### **RF says**

Thoroughly enjoyed MacLean's recent books so I decided to go back to the start. Not disappointed. It's a murder mystery in which the politics and religious debates of early 17th century Scotland are integral to the plot. Not everyone's cup of porridge but it's brilliantly done, helped by MacLean being a superb writer. If you like well-researched, well-plotted and well-written historical novels, especially mysteries, this one is for you.

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### **Ruth says**

c2008: FWFTB: Banff, embittered, murder, Catholic, witch. This book is exquisitely written. The period seems to have been effortlessly invoked and the dialogue in tune with the time and mores of the 17th C. I did not guess the murderer! There is some lovely humorous one-liners which stops the novel from sinking into being 'depressing' *"He was the eyes and ears of Baillie Buchan who, by some oversight on the part of Beelzebub, could not be in two places at once."* Some knowledge of the particular period of history that the book is set in may be an advantage to understand just how severe the religious restrictions were in Scotland at the time together with the background of the enmity between Scottish Catholics and Protestants. Being a true Sassenach, I had trouble with remembering the difference between the baillie and provost despite there being a glossary at the back of the book. Recommended to the normal crew. FCN: Gilbert Grant, Edward Arbuthnott (the apothecary), Dr Jaffray, Alexander Seaton, Walter Watt.

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### **Elizabeth Moffat says**

This is the first book in the Alexander Seaton series by British author Shona MacLean, a tale of 17th century Scotland, full of intrigue, mystery and religious fervour. Our main character Alexander is a school master although he would dearly love to be a minister, and was prevented from achieving this by a mistake made when he fell for the “wrong woman.” Things kick off for Alexander when a man whom he knows is found murdered by poisoning in his school room. The previous night, he had seen this man stumbling and calling for help, but he dismissed him as a drunkard so now feels incredibly guilty, and desires to redeem himself by finding the murderer. It does not help that Charles Thom, a friend of Alexander’s is deemed guilty of the crime and is put in prison, so Alexander must work to clear his name and find the true perp.

I have to confess it took me a while to get into this book as there are a lot of characters to take in, and it took me a while until I had figured out just who the “provost,” “ballie,” “session clerk,” and “apothecary,” were, as they are sometimes referred to by their title and then referred to by their Christian name in another sentence. Once I had got that under control, I began to appreciate the beautiful style of writing, and the atmosphere of 17th century Scotland that the author creates. Every smell, sight and sound are captured in minute detail for the reader, and I began to get a real picture of life in Scotland at that time, where individuals could be persecuted for their own beliefs. The style reminded me very much of the Shardlake series by C.J. Sansom which I thoroughly enjoyed and highly recommend. I did not appreciate the mystery of the novel until about halfway through, when more strands of the story come together, and it became slightly more gripping. Would I read the second book in the series? Probably, as Seaton was such an interesting character, and I wouldn’t mind getting to know him a bit better.

Please see my full review at <http://www.bibliobeth.wordpress.com>

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### **kingsheart says**

This was a pretty good mystery, with enough clues to figure it out, but subtly enough placed that it wasn't completely obvious. I definitely picked up on some of the key clues before they were made explicit, but I didn't make all the connections, particularly those concerning motive. The clues for even that were there, though, no question.

There were a few parts that dragged, and it took a while before I really got into the story, but once I was in, and the twists and turns and conspiracy theories got going, I chewed through it all pretty quick.

Mostly I'm left, as I frequently am with books set in this kind of time period, with a certain sadness, both at the ridiculous ways people will turn on each other, and with the just about as ridiculous social constraints that lead to so much heartache.

The first is evidenced in the witch hunt that starts partway through. Those, I can never wrap my head around. Even the starting point of religious fervour that opens the door to that sort of insanity is basically alien to me, so the way it catches on like wildfire and turns everyone against their best friends to the point of condemning people to be burned alive for what you know deep down inside somewhere is absolutely no reason? I can't even begin to understand that. And knowing that so often it was the women who were different, who didn't fit the accepted roles of women, who were guilty of nothing but a crazy desire to be treated as more than simply a womb with legs, or, almost even worse, were guilty of nothing more than wanting to help people's

health, who were condemned to this is just so frustrating as a modern woman. It's hard to keep from becoming a raging, foaming-at-the-mouth angry feminist in the face of this sort of history. It leaves you feeling helpless, because so many of these people could have had such amazing lives, and gone on to make amazing contributions to society, if only they'd been allowed to do so. Ultimately, it's just really really sad.

And then there are the social constraints. Alexander's fall is so sad. He fell in love with someone above his station, but who he had a good chance of being allowed to marry anyway, until her brother dies and she's left as the only heir, meaning that she must marry well. One night together is all they have to give each other, and they get caught, and that's it. She's a whore, and he's a man of no morals, who can no longer be allowed to pursue his calling to the ministry. That's sad enough, but the real shame is what comes after. She, in defiance of her family, comes after him, and asks him to marry her anyway, but he, feeling that he's lost everything anyway and has nothing further to offer her, denies her, sealing his fate. And that's the really sad thing. By sleeping with her, he made her a whore. By marrying her, he would have made her a respectable wife, and although it wouldn't have solved all their problems and he might still have had to pursue an alternate career path, the marriage would have legitimized their relationship, and almost erased the scandal entirely in the eyes of most of society. Her family probably would have taken longer, but in time, even they likely would have welcomed them back to the fold, if not with wide open arms, at least with civility. Instead, he left things in the worst possible situation, and that is just so incredibly sad.

I won't say too much about the mystery plot itself, except to say that everything is wrapped up nicely in the end, and MacLean didn't leave any loose ends hanging, which is always nice. Nothing was so far fetched as to leave you unsatisfied, and even Alexander's redemption is imperfect enough to feel realistic. I think I'd read another of her books if I were to stumble across one.

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## LJ says

THE REDEMPTION OF ALEXANDER SEATON (Hist. Mys-Alexander Seaton-Scotland-1626) - Ex MacLean, Shona – 1st book  
Quercus, 2008, UK Hardcover – ISBN: 9781847245052

First Sentence: The younger of the two shires rifled the man's pockets with expert fingers.

Young Alexander Seaton, disallowed from becoming a minister, is now a teacher in his town of Banff, Scotland. He sees a man who staggers and falls on the street during a dark, wet night, but doesn't stop to help.

With morning comes the revelation that the man was the apprentice to the town apothecary and nephew to the town proctor. He had also been poisoned and found dead in Alexander's classroom. Alexander's friend, Charles Thom, who has also been living with the apothecary, is arrested for the murder. It falls to Alexander to prove his friend's innocence.

There was so much to this book, it's hard to know where to begin. Though it's not necessary indicative of excellent writing, I thought it interesting that Ms. MacLean is the niece to author Alistair MacLean (Guns of Navarone). Both MacLeans excel at bringing the reader into the story. From there, they are vastly different.

Ms. McLean makes real life in 1626 Scotland; the time of Charles I, after the dissolution and separation from Rome, but during a time of Knox and Melville Presbyterianism, religious prejudice and the rise of witch

hunts. It's a story of murder, ambition, fear and bigotry, but also of strength, goodness and that we never truly know how we are perceived by others.

Alexander is a wonderful protagonist who becomes very real as his story unfolds throughout the story. A cast of characters would have been helpful, in the beginning, but all the characters are fully dimensional so it quickly became a non-issue. I did appreciate the short glossary at the end.

The story is dense and rich with detail and emotion, compassion and suspense. There was never a point where I wasn't compelled to turn the page and read more. It's a powerfully evocative book with wonderful historic detail that never overshadows an engrossing story.

I should love for this to be the first of a series. Even if it's not, I shall definitely read whatever Ms. MacLean writes next.

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