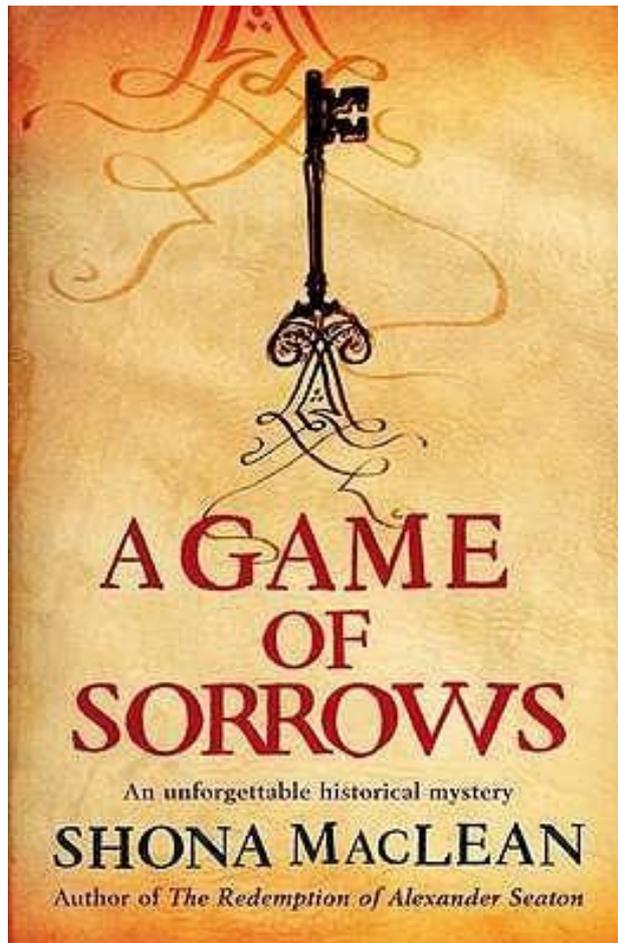


A Game of Sorrows

By Shona Maclean



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

A Game of Sorrows
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Review

Alexander Seaton, the first person narrator and central character, is an established Aberdeen academic. A young Presbyterian bachelor, his superiors have just given him a welcome assignment, to go to Poland to select and then bring back the two best recruits for university training that he can find. His superiors expect that this task will take four months, he savors the plan as it will entail travel through continental Europe, a prospect he looks forward to. The expenses, obviously needed wisdom and explicit confidence in his abilities all indicate that this is an important step upward in his world. He knows this and as the orphaned son of a not prosperous tradesman, knows what a rare chance he has. On the night before his journey begins he visits friends where his intended bride, Sarah resides. He rapidly finds himself puzzled by his reception. Instead of the usual cheer he finds at best curt responses and formal politeness. Hostility and avoidance are the more common reactions. He has supposedly been seen earlier that night, drunk, being lecherous and fighting in the street, all by four reliable witnesses.

Returning to his room, he finds himself staring at a living image of himself who wants him to go to Ulster, with the journey starting that night. This works as a classic example if ever there was one of Joseph Campbell's call to adventure by going on the hero journey.

Ulster in 1628 is indeed the dangerous, disordered, mysterious and challenging land of hero tales. With strong elements of the supernatural, magic and preordained fates, resemblances to mythic hero tales becomes stronger. The difference to fantasy however, becomes crucial. Here such things gain power not by being a reality within a narrative, but by being a force within a narrative because people make it so by sincerely believing in these things which do not really exist. Some of that belief comes from their unquestioned traditions and some from the environment, much of it being wild landscapes, sinister forests, dotted with

megaliths, magic stone rings and abandoned churches, all of which make such beliefs easy. This society is also fractious and filled with strange, erratic, dangerous people bearing enmities. They make the current Middle East look placid and uncomplicated.

The plot abounds in mysteries, obviously starting with who this apparent twin is, why he wants Alexander to go to Ulster and next, amazingly, why Alexander does go with him, throwing all his advantages away on an hour's notice. As the adventures unfold in Ulster answers to these questions become apparent, if at least only to some extent before the denouement. The apparent twin is Sean O'Neill FitzGarrett, supposedly a maternal first cousin. He wants a double to impersonate him, as someone is out to kill him. Alexander must stay at the family base in Carrickfergus, while Sean goes on an important and dangerous family mission, to lift a curse placed on the family by Finn O'Rahilly, a bard. This happened months before at the Deidre O'Neill-FitzGarrett wedding where she married the unattractive son of a coarse English merchant. This family, the Blackstones, the epitome of exploitative New English rapacity in Ulster, are marrying into the O'Neill's, the most recalcitrant Irish rebels: why? As she is astoundingly beautiful and Cormac O'Neill, handsome, young and noble longs for her and she also has many other Irish suitors, this becomes another conundrum in a narrative rapidly overflowing with them. Maeve and her supporters delegate her brother Sean to find out who is behind the Bard's wrecking of the wedding and why they did it.

This is not a society where bards raining down curses and prophecies of violent death and failure at a wedding are laughed off. Maeve, matriarch of the O'Neill clan, believes in these words and the power of the bards who make them, she believes this very deeply and very sincerely. She also believes the curse and the prophecy can be lifted. Sean also believes this, but in a more cynical way as he is sure somebody paid Finn O'Rahilly for his wedding disservices.

While Sean is away Alexander learns a great deal about his relatives and the dangerous, puzzling society he has come into. Much of this information comes from the O'Neill's business

manager, Andrew Boyd, a believing Presbyterian who despises both the blood feuds and Catholicism as pagan, almost satanic. So why work for the O'Neills?

The conquest of Ireland by England was a slow process, beginning with the Normans and ending uneasily with the defeat of the great rebel hero, the Lord of Tyrone, who surrendered on March 17th 1603, the day Elizabeth I died. This was soon followed by what is still known of as "the flight of the earls" when in the north and the east many of Catholic Ireland's leaders fled to Europe. The dispossession of the Catholic Irish rapidly accelerated as those giving up either migrated overseas or resettled in southern and western Ireland, where English power was weaker. Of those that stayed most were disempowered and impoverished, while a few went over to the English. A few, (as in this fictional depiction of the once powerful, now sullen O'Neill clan) survived with some of their wealth and power intact. They managed to do this by being shrewd, not quite collaborators, but making money from a symbiotic relationship with the hated English.

While this sounds a simply developed conflict, the hidden motivations almost everyone in this novel has and the juxtaposition of conflicting groups within Ulster made the situation fluid, complicated and dangerous.

The indigenous population of Irish Catholics blended with group known as the old English. These were the earlier English colonists who were to differing extents assimilated into Irish society and culture, and therefore having at best dubious loyalties to the English government, the Protestant religion and the English crown. Frequently they were hostile to all three. This was a direct contrast to the new English. They arrived en masse after 1603 and were fanatically loyal to all three previously mentioned English forces. While the old English frequently admired and preserved Irish culture, the new English despised it and tried to eradicate it.



Landscapes like this encourage supernatural beliefs

Brian Lenehan / Ulster Canal, Clones Road, Monaghan
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/85/Ulster_Canal%2C_Clones_Road%2C_Monaghan_-_geograph.org.uk_-_1628690.jpg

Although Shona Maclean mentions the waning power of the bards and their near disappearance, she does not mention that Elizabeth I banned them as an attempt to suppress the wild Irish. While the new English were predominantly Anglican, their uneasy allies were with the Scots Presbyterian colonists. Like the English, they came to Ulster to trade and to set up plantations, sometimes doing both. Economic necessity meant that while despising each other they would frequently have to work together. All four groups saw the other three as heretics and all four were in shifting economic alliances as well as enmities, with each other and with their ruler. By 1628 they were ruled over by Charles I, who was Scottish by birth, King of England, Scotland and Ireland by position and Anglican by religion, despite being married to a strict French Catholic. This combination pleased nobody and led to repressive, unpopular and ineffectual rule.

This whole process could have sunk the story and the reader's interest, but it is to Shona Maclean's credit that her literary skills makes this complicated, messy situation not only comprehensible, but interesting. Subconscious motivations, hidden agendas, treason, murder, intrigues and treachery abound in *A Game of Sorrows*. Eventually everything is revealed and justice is served, but Ulster 1628 emerges as a place best avoided.

This is no mere adventure novel. Shona writes as someone who can mix two rarely joined literary atmospheres, the vivid and the subtle. The complexity of her characters, her ability to recreate seventeenth century speech and mentalities in all their now archaic ways and the way she can use mythic elements of a hero tale and blend them with realism, all display a great literary skill. Her uncle, the novelist Alistair Maclean, was shrewd when he encouraged her to write.

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