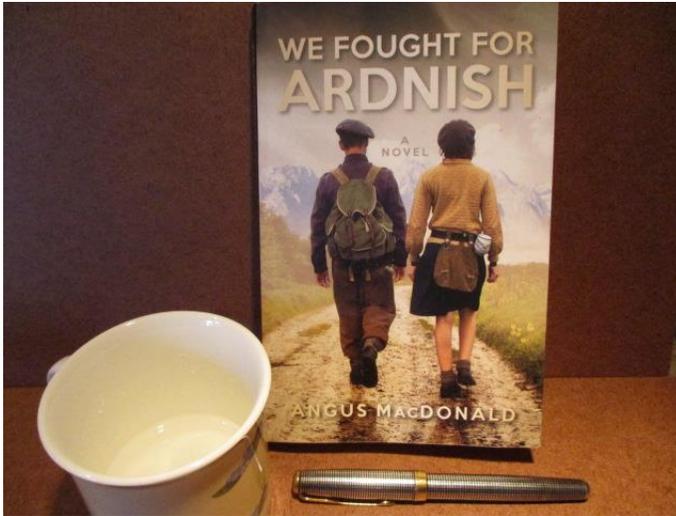


We Fought for Ardnish

By Rod Fraser



What a lovely novel! What an unusual way to tell a story. I highly recommend this book. I discovered it by reading a newspaper review late last year. I was drawn to the picture on the cover, and since I hail from an old Scottish family, I thought I would give it a try.

I ordered it from Amazon on December 28th, and just short of two months later, it arrived in my post. A long time for a simple paperback to find its way to a buyer.

It turns out the setting of much of this story is in

a little Scottish village, some 70 miles south (by road) from Glenelg—a place where my g-g-great grandparents were born, lived and married. Then they left Scotland to come to what was then Upper Canada in the early nineteenth century.



We Fought for Ardnish is a fictional story about Donald Angus Gillies, a young soldier in the *Lovat Scouts*. He enlists in the army at the start of the Second World War, rises through the ranks and eventually becomes a Captain.

Angus is not an ordinary soldier, but part of the SOE—Special Operation Executive. Those who signed up for this branch of the service underwent training in explosives, small unit tactics, hand-to-hand combat and other necessary skills for operating behind enemy lines.

Then they were flown into enemy territory to work with the resistance, blowing up bridges and rail lines and helping with hit and run attacks to weaken Axis forces. Angus was sent to that part of Europe where the French, Italian and Swiss borders meet.

In his first mission, he was sent to help the resistance blow up two mountain passes to prevent the movement of enemy troops and supplies. Françoise, a young French-speaking woman, who

hails from Nova Scotia (also a soldier in the SOE), was a part of his team. After the demolition of the mountain pass is complete, Angus is instructed to deliver her to the French Resistance on the other side of the mountain.

Françoise has been assigned a separate mission. She is to travel to a nearby town and assassinate a senior German officer in a daring raid that is likely to result in her death or capture. She is to keep these plans to herself. This is difficult, because in their time together, Angus and Françoise fall in love—although nothing is said by either of them to confirm this reality.

Françoise is delivered safely to the French resistance and leaves on her mission. While successful, she is badly injured during the raid and subsequently interrogated and tortured by the Gestapo. Françoise is later interned for a time in a French prison, but manages to escape while being transported with other prisoners to a French court.

This is the start of her long trek of 1,400 miles down through France and ultimately into Spain, where she makes her way back to England. Her soldiering days are over. With her injuries and poor health, she is advised to return home to Nova Scotia to repair her body and recuperate.

Angus returns to England after destroying the

mountain passes mentioned earlier. For the next year or two, he is an instructor at various SOE training camps, moving from place to place as part of his work. Towards the end of the war, he is dropped into France for one final mission.



There is much more to this story, but you will have to buy the book to learn all the details. I think it is safe to say that Angus and Françoise manage to find each other at war's end and it is a touching moment.

Although notionally a war story, this book takes many wonderful pages to describe the rural life of Ardnish, where Angus grew up and hopes to live at the war's end. The book mentions his grandparents, mother and father, and tells their story in a touching and meaningful way.

There are some charming innovations to this novel that are new (at least to me) and quite imaginative. For example, the story of Sheena, Angus' aunt, is told by way of a memoir she wrote of her life, and passed along to her daughter, Morag.

Angus is given the memoir to read while visiting Sheena's home in Nova Scotia. It is a story of a plucky Scottish woman who endured many hardships during the early years, after immigrating to Nova Scotia. It is very moving and wonderfully

written.

The other literary innovation is Françoise's story. It is largely told in the third person with a few scant details of her mission and early life. I waited and waited to hear more of her story, told in her own words, but it seemed like it was never to come.

MacDonald followed an old story telling maxim, which I refer to as 'Let them wait'. It was very effective. By the time Françoise finally appears in the text, I was hopping up and down with excitement. And I was richly rewarded: her story is one of the best parts of the book.

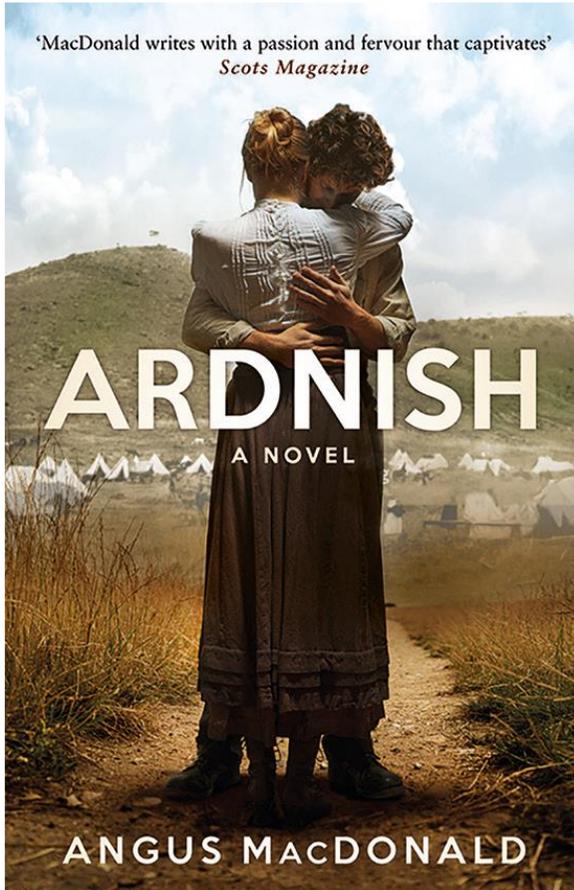


When I finished reading this novel, I emailed the author, Angus MacDonald, in Scotland. I told him how much I liked it, and mentioned my familial ties to the Ardnish area.

Sure enough I received an email within a few days thanking me for my kind words. MacDonald mentioned he had traveled to Nova Scotia last year to promote his novel and hoped to be in Toronto this coming October to do the same.

He also mentioned his new book called *Ardnish* (have a look at the write-up below) which is coming out this June. That will complete a trilogy of books about the village of Ardnish and the various war

years. I have read one of the three so far and ordered the others. You should do the same.



This book tells the story of "old Donald John [the grandfather of Donald Angus Gillies of 'We Fought for Ardnish']", at his home in the Highlands. His thoughts are full of his soldiering days with the Lovat Scouts during the Boer War in 1900, the

massacre of his fellow soldiers, and accompanying a woman and her daughter to the concentration camp. Before he dies, he needs the priest to hear his last confession, he is wracked with guilt."

April 15, 2020