

Outlander: the history that inspired the drama

The historical drama series *Outlander* is based on a series of novels by Diana Gabaldon. Despite its fictional narrative, much of the story is based on historical fact.

The TV show follows its characters in the Second World War, the Jacobite risings of the 18th-century and North Carolina on the eve of the American Revolution. The show's protagonist is Claire (played by Caitriona Balfe) and she travels initially between the 1940s and the 1740s. Here, we examine some of the real events featured in the drama.



The Jacobite Risings

Jacobitism emerged in Britain after the forced abdication of King James II during the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688. James and his descendants were forced to live in permanent exile in Europe, relying on the financial support and hospitality of foreign powers. The crown passed to James's daughter, Mary, and her husband, William of Orange. Supporters of the exiled family (the Stuarts) became known as 'Jacobites', derived from the word 'Jacobus', the Latin name for James. While Jacobitism was an international movement, attracting supporters from all over Europe, the military effort to restore the Stuarts to the monarchy was concentrated in Scotland.



Claire, a Second World War battlefield nurse, travels through time to find herself in the Highlands of Scotland in 1743 amid the final part of the Jacobite rising. As she settles into 18th-century life, she begins to hear whispers of support for King James's son, James Francis Edward Stuart, and his grandson, Charles Edward Stuart (popularly known in Scotland as "Bonnie Prince Charlie").





Remembering her history lessons, Claire realises that the Jacobites will be defeated by the forces of Prince William, Duke of Cumberland, at the Battle of Culloden on 16 April 1746. With the knowledge that the Jacobite cause is doomed to failure, Claire and her 18th-century husband, Jamie Fraser (played by Sam Heughan), attempt to change the course of history. Their efforts take them to the homes of Scottish lords, the mansions of English aristocrats and across the channel to the French

court, where they attempt to dissuade King Louis XV from financially backing Charles Edward Stuart's campaign. The show's interpretation of Jacobitism is rather romantic in nature, but it also shows the dangers and divisive nature of the Jacobite cause in 18th-century Scotland.

Outlander also explores the pressures faced by the heads of Highland clans in openly declaring their allegiances during the final rising of 1746. The decision to fight for King George II (of the Hanover family) or to support the exiled James Edward Stuart was a difficult one. The penalties associated with Jacobite treason were severe: execution, loss of property, social exclusion and financial ruin. After the defeat of the Jacobite army at Culloden, 3,472 Jacobites were arrested, 120 were sentenced to death, and more than 900 were exiled to America and the Caribbean.

Despite the danger, some people attempted to "play both sides", for their own benefit, such as the famous 'Old Fox', Simon Fraser, Lord Lovat. He was a notoriously cunning double-dealer, who frequently changed his allegiances to suit his own interests. In the final Jacobite rising of 1746, he refused to personally commit himself to the Jacobite fight, but he sent his son, Simon, Master of Lovat, and a regiment of Fraser clansmen to join Charles Edward Stuart. He later said that he had not supported his son's actions, in an attempt to cement his support for the Hanover dynasty. However his deception was unsuccessful, and he was executed for high treason in London on 9 April 1747.





The story of *Outlander* routinely references the lives and deeds of real historical figures. While the show's interpretation of history is sometimes twisted, its story mentions many real people. One of the most prominent figures in this period of Scottish history is Flora MacDonald, whose life had many similarities to Gabaldon's characters. Despite her family's support of the British government during the 1746 rising, MacDonald helped Charles Edward Stuart to escape after the Jacobite defeat at Culloden.

When Charles Stuart was being hunted by the forces of the Duke of Cumberland, Flora risked her life by disguising herself as a maid and accompanied Charles to the Isle of Skye on a small boat. The escape became a celebrated moment in Scottish history and is commemorated in the 'Skye Boat Song', a popular ballad that is used as *Outlander's* theme tune (see page 5).

Flora was later caught and imprisoned for her role in Charles's escape, but she was eventually freed under the Act of Indemnity of 1747. After her time in captivity, she married Allan MacDonald, a captain in the British Army and emigrated to North Carolina in America, building a house in a location similar to that of Jamie and Claire's home portrayed in the TV show.



The journey to the Americas

It was not uncommon for Scottish people to journey to America in the 18th-century, with North Carolina becoming a popular destination. Scottish-born Gabriel Johnston served as governor of the state from 1734 until 1752, with the first large influx of Scottish immigrants arriving in 1739. By the early 1770s, over 4,000 Scottish men, women and children were settled along the Cape Fear River.

Life on the frontier was tough. Many of the estates granted to settlers in North Carolina relied on the forced labour of slaves brought from Africa and the West Indies to produce cotton and tobacco. By the end of the 18th century, the US census recorded 133,296 slaves in the state. The region also witnessed a turbulent relationship between white settlers and local Native American tribes. In 1763, King George III issued a Royal Proclamation that prohibited Anglo-American colonists from settling on Native American land. The Proclamation drew strong criticism from Anglo-Americans who felt that they were being controlled by a distant British monarch. Consequently, there were many calls for revolution. Just like Jamie Fraser, Flora MacDonald's husband, Allan MacDonald, was responsible for raising a local British-loyal militia in 1775. A few months into the American War of Independence, he was captured and taken prisoner and Flora was evicted from their home. The pair eventually made their way back to Scotland.

Materialising the past

From weaponry and clothing to medical equipment and paintings, *Outlander* uses props and costumes to present a tangible historical world.

When Claire escapes the aftermath of the battle of Culloden and returns to the 20th century, she visits a fictional museum built near the battlefield. Perusing the objects on display, many of which she has already experienced in the 18th century, she complains to a fellow visitor that the museum misinterpreted events to present Bonnie Prince Charlie as a tragic, romantic hero.

Most of the filming for the show took place in Scotland and Prague.



Sources:

<https://www.historyextra.com/period/georgian/outlander-real-true-history-scotland-jacobites-claire-jamie-fraser-historical-accuracy/>

<https://parade.com/962428/lesley-chen/outlander-filming-locations/>

Time periods for each season

Season 1: Time Period: 1743–1746

The story begins in 1945, but after Claire Randall is mysteriously transported back in time to 1743, most of the season is set during the Jacobite rising and political struggles of Scotland.

Season 2: Time Period: 1744–1746

Much of Season 2 takes place in Paris, where Claire and Jamie are trying to prevent the Jacobite rebellion from happening. They move between France and Scotland, and the season ends at the time of the Battle of Culloden in 1746.

Season 3: Time Period: 1766–1778

Season 3 begins with Claire's return to the 1940s and then jumps ahead to 1766, when Claire and Jamie reunite after being separated for 20 years. The season spans several years, as it follows their lives in the American colonies and their involvement in the build-up to the American Revolution.

Season 4: Time Period: 1767–1770

Set mostly in the American colonies, Season 4 follows Claire and Jamie as they settle in North Carolina. This season takes place before the American Revolution, and there is much conflict around the formation of their new family and community.

Season 5: Time Period: 1770–1772

Continuing in the American colonies, Season 5 is set in the years just before the American Revolution. It shows the increasing tensions between the colonists and the British authorities.

Season 6: Time Period: 1773–1775

Set in the years leading up to the revolution, Season 6 follows the Frasers as they face political unrest, confrontations with loyalists, and tensions that foreshadow the American Revolution. The season builds up to the events of the revolution, which are more prominent in Season 7. The American War of Independence (also known as the American Revolution) lasted from April 19, 1775, to September 3, 1783.

Season 7: Time Period: 1776–1778

Season 7 picks up in 1776, just as the American Revolution is beginning. This season focuses on Claire and Jamie's involvement in the war and the broader conflict between the colonies and Great Britain. It covers a time of great upheaval for the Frasers and all participants in the war.

Season 8: Time Period: ???

The Skye Boat Song

This is a 19th-century Scottish traditional song composed in 1782 by William Ross. The lyrics evoke the journey of Prince Charles Edward Stuart ("Bonnie Prince Charlie") from Benbecula to the Isle of Skye as he evaded capture by government soldiers after his defeat at the Battle of Culloden in 1746.

Chorus:

Sing me a song of a lass that is gone.
Say, could that lass be I?
Merry of soul she sailed on a day
Over the sea to Skye.

Mull was astern, Rum on the port,
Eigg on the starboard bow.
Glory of youth glowed in his soul
Where is that glory now?



Chorus

Give me again all that was there,
Give me the sun that shone,
Give me the eyes, give me the soul,
Give me the lad that's gone.

Chorus

Billow and breeze, islands and seas,
Mountains of rain and sun,
All that was good, all that was fair,
All that was me is gone.

Chorus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-zQoQ1ckFxl>