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Librarians Tour of Scotland

Carolee Hirsch
Eugene Public Library
BLAAAAAT! What th…? I fumble the alarm clock off, but the noise continues
BLAAAAAT! If we were at home, I’d think the library was having a fire drill. But it’s 4 a.m.
in a University of Edinburgh dormitory, and BLAAAAAT! It is a fire alarm!

My roommate Jennifer and I pull blankets around our shoulders and head outside with
all the teens who are here for a swim competition. A few teens obviously have not yet been
to bed. One young man shivering in his boxers obviously had been deeply asleep.

Jennifer and I are not teenage swimmers. We are middle-aged librarians on a Librarians
Tour to Scotland, led by Jane Pearlmutter, of the University of Wisconsin library school. For
the next two weeks we visit traditional tourist sites, such as Edinburgh Castle and Rosslyn
Chapel. But we also tour libraries, such as the modern Mitchell Library in Glasgow and Sir
Walter Scott’s personal collection in his home Abbotsford. Down a lane through a pasture
where tree branches scrape the top of our bus, we find the lovely Innerpeffray Library,
Scotland’s first public library. In the 1600s when the library opened, this was the main road
across Scotland. We gaze at early books and then at the librarian’s new little daughter while
his wife serves us tea and cookies.

But first, a few hours after that early fire alarm, triggered by a forbidden cigarette too
close to a smoke detector, we tour the National Library of Scotland. In an elegant paneled
room, scholars in mandatory white gloves examine rare books propped on special stands.
We learn the process for requesting admission to this reading room and for requesting mate-
rials from the closed stacks. Then we are led down into the depths of the decidedly utili-
tarian closed stacks. Our guide is explaining that in order to make best use of the limited
space, the books are organized by size, when BLAAAAAT! The guide is terribly polite and
embarrassed, but we must evacuate the building due to a fire alarm. Visiting libraries, like
all travel, can be full of surprises. That’s why we go.

Jane Pearlmutter combines her passions for
teach and librarianship by leading library
tours abroad. It is probably too late to
sign up for the Librarians Tour to Germany
in 2011, but to receive information about
future tours, you may contact her at:

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