



The Highland Twins at the Chalet School

Elinor M. Brent-Dyer

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Flora and Fiona McDonald, who have never before left their island home, attempt to make new friends at the school.

The Highland Twins at the Chalet School Details

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Trish says

I read this book in the original 1942 edition, on the wartime paper of low quality. It presumably belonged to my mother. Even in the '50s books weren't too plentiful so we read them over and over. I liked this one because it had Scottish children in it, with delightful Highland accents, so the alien environment of a boarding school was made less foreign.

Having the "second sight" is a useful ability in a troubled age!

Lisa says

Highland twins Flora and Fiona arrive lost and alone at the Chalet school and put under the wing of much loved Jo Maynard before being installed at the Chalet School. It is wartime Britain and their brothers and sister have had to join up and their island home has been taken over for the duration. Never having been at school before, there are many things to learn, not the least making friends - and enemies! Before long Flora and Fiona are embroiled in an attempt by a German spy to steal away their map of their island which could give vital clues to secrets and compromise the safety of the nation!

Also thrown into the mix, two old girls, German's, have escaped Nazi Germany and made it to the Chalet school for safety. Their tale compounds the old Chalet School Peace Treaty and brings home the fact that being German doesn't equal being a Nazi. A moral to the story as well as fun.

I'll never be too old to read Chalet School books - and hopefully, someday I will complete my collection. The Maynard's, Bettany's Russell's, Bill and Miss Annersley, Rosalie Dene, Simone and Frieda - all old friends that it's lovely to say hello to every now and then!

Meira (readingbooksinIsrael) says

I think this is my favorite Chalet School book

Sarah says

Flora and Fiona McDonald make their first appearance in this book. They are twins, who have never left their shelter home on a small island before. Due to the war, they are forced to leave their home, and move to the Chalet School. Joey takes them in under her wing, and she's richly rewarded in the end when one of the twins is able to help her out during one of the toughest times in her life.

Rosemary says

Far too many characters and a bit sentimental, but interesting incidental insights on life in the UK during the war. Implausible plot.

Sally says

This was one of my favourite "eras" of the Chalet School, and I especially loved the new twins! Great book.

Deborah says

In which EBD experiments with 'second sight' à la L M Montgomery. Lots else happens, especially in the hardback (this is one of those CSBs where if you only have the paperback, there's a significant chunk missing - not actual plot, obv's, this being EBD, but that special Chaletishness which appeals to fans). But the main point of the Highland Twins themselves seems to be Flora's uncanny ability to 'see'. EBD isn't really comfortable with this (Miss Wilson goes off to pray while it's going on, making her position *very* clear) but I think the dramatic possibilities swayed her.

We've missed a couple of Chalet years in the gap from *Goes to It*, so there's some excuse for confusion about who has each vegetable plot, for example, but there are EBDisms a-plenty in this book, from how late the train from Stockport actually was (and why they travelled on the route they did anyway, although I accept that's one for train nerds like myself), to Biddy suddenly getting a new surname.

Mainly this book is an interesting one for die-hard fans because it's about Betty Wynne-Davies's final fall from grace. I'm sure if we'd known about Betty's miserable home background earlier, we'd all have been more sympathetic, but we didn't, so it's hard not to cheer. That German spy was rubbish, though. And why didn't Floppy Williams and Hilda Hope stand up to say they'd heard of the Chart of Erisay? Really, were they that forgetful?

My main gripe, though (and you may have gathered this isn't my favourite CSB) is how Shiena, Flora and Fiona talk. My best friend comes from about two islands up from Erisay and she doesn't talk like that *at all* (or go travelling in full Highland dress, for that matter).

All that said, I do like the MacDonalds, and they join a good set of junior middles that we get to know very well over the years. It's also great to have some old friends reappearing. And where EBD earns her full marks is in Emmie and Joanna Linders' story. We first met the Linders in Tyrol, when Jo herself was head girl, and in *Highland Twins* Emmie tells us about life in Nazi Germany for those who opposed Hitler. EBD conveys the horror more by what isn't said than by what is, and it's hard to tell how this would have registered at the time - my eyes may well be clouded by history. But even so, it's well done, and I don't think many school-story writers would include it.

And then just when it was going so well, the School revives its famous Nativity play, described in relentless detail because it's Joey's first one (although I've no idea when she found time to write it - maybe she dashed it off in the aftermath of Flora's vision). Goodwill and joy, goodwill and joy ...

Donna Boulton says

This was another exciting chalet school book. I thought it was going the usual way of new girls joining the school, a misunderstanding/upsetting someone then something happens and all make up. Not this one! It brought the war right back into the forefront and showed how very one was affected, or could've been. What a dramatic scene with Joey getting the telegram. Another enjoyable read!

L.H. Johnson says

I used to always think that *The Highland Twins at the Chalet School* was one of the poorer books. Coming so soon after the dizzy heights of *The Chalet School In Exile*, I always found *Highland Twins at the Chalet School* a little - well - cheesy.

But now, after a re-reading of the hardback edition, I feel I need to make an apology to it. *Highland Twins at the Chalet School* is actually, very quietly, one of the strongest titles in the series.

Following the nearly now-traditional format of new girl, new term, the eponymous *Highland Twins* Flora and Fauna (sorry, Fiona) McDonald are experiencing their first term at the Chalet School. The twins, having grown up on a remote Scottish island, have very little experience of the world outside their home. Thrown into a furious maelstrom of wartime hardship, schoolgirl feuds, and tragedy, the twins have to come to terms with a whole new world (and a new fantastic point of view).

The hardback edition is worth seeking out if you can as there's a whole new subplot featuring Elisaveta which has been rampantly cut out of every paperback edition I've ever come across. It's strange, really, as if there's any peculiar joy about the Chalet School series it is to be found in the encyclopedic recounting of old girls' exploits. Although, if you do manage to grab the hardback, you'll have to cope with some spectacularly hideous phonetic spelling every time one of the Highlanders speak. It's quite something - there's a whole word of "nefer" and "iss" and "haf"

What makes *Highland Twins at The Chalet School* work, and indeed all of Brent-Dyers wartime Chalet School books, is her focus on personal responsibility. Nazism, and the evils therein, are resolutely and (quite amazingly considering the national psyche at the time) portrayed as individual choice. There is a moment where two old girls arrive at the Chalet School having escaped from Germany and the recounting of their experiences is an emotional surgical strike. Nazism is described as a disease, a sickness which has infected Germany, and there is always a careful distinction between Nazism and the everyday German.

The other part of *Highland Twins at the Chalet School* which has a deceptively sharp impact is Fiona's ability with "the sight". This is the part that always hit me as superbly cheesy despite the dramatic emotional contexts she utilises her abilities in. But upon this re-reading, I was struck by the almost symbolic usage of her skill. There's a moment where Fiona does something massively important for an individual (I'm trying desperately not to spoil anything here) and it's hard not to read a certain wistful angle to this entire episode.

If you're into the Chalet School, you'll read this regardless. But if you're not, I'd genuinely recommend this

period of books (starting off with *The Chalet School in Exile*) as a worthwhile stepping on point. These are books which are almost hiding as children's books whilst presenting some massively serious and provocative ideologies that still bear weight today.

Shawne says

Plenty of unlikely things take place at the Chalet School - the preponderance of charming doctors ready and willing to marry fresh graduates, for instance, or the number of cliff-top/mountainside rescues effected through sheer strength of will and strained nerves. But none is quite so unlikely as the supernatural element that infuses the last act of *The Highland Twins At The Chalet School*. Personally, I didn't enjoy it that much, although I do think that Elinor M. Brent-Dyer, being very much at the peak of her authorial powers at this point, handles it well enough for what it is.

The shadow of World War II still looms large over the School as the eponymous twins - Flora and Fiona McDonald - arrive for the new term. Sequestered for their entire lives on the remote Scottish island of Erisay, the McDonald twins must get used to the hustle, bustle and general cheerful rowdiness of Jo Maynard's clan, before integrating themselves into the School proper. The twins cross paths with firebrand Betty Wynne-Davis, who decides to use an old McDonald family secret against them, even as one of the series' heroines must struggle to deal with the heartbreaking costs of war.

As a chronicle of wartime privations and circumstances, the first two-thirds of *Highland Twins* works very well indeed. Brent-Dyer folds a great deal of detail and insight into her tale, from the British Admiralty taking possession of Erisay, through to blackout windows and the war work being undertaken by women of all ages and backgrounds. The ordinary bravery of people living through the most extraordinary and horrifying of times is sensitively conveyed, particularly when the spirit and message of the Chalet School Peace League manifest themselves in the form of two German girls refusing to conform to the Nazism infecting their country.

The final third of the book reads somewhat oddly - almost as if Brent-Dyer had crafted it as a novella to stand on its own. The revelation that Fiona McDonald has a very special gift (I'm trying to avoid spoilers here) feels faintly out of place. As I've said, plenty of outlandish and ridiculous things happen in the Chalet School universe, but the detour into the realm of the supernatural just seems more surreal than anything else. The plot twist is handled delicately once it's introduced, however: Brent-Dyer finds tiny moments of truth and depth in Fiona's attempt to help her erstwhile guardian through a time of immense grief - an attempt that, touchingly, temporarily alienates her from her own twin.

There's an espionage angle that's quite decently threaded throughout the novel too, as a mysterious man breaks into the School lockers. *Highland Twins* was a relatively recent acquisition for me i.e., I didn't read it when I was the target audience for the series, so it's gratifying to see that the journey of inveterate troublemaker Betty Wynne-Davis is treated with such quiet, sensitive intelligence here. She's one of the School's biggest problem students, without a doubt, but Brent-Dyer provides just enough glimpses into her troubled home life to make Betty a living, breathing and very credibly wrongheaded young lady.

All in all, *Highland Twins* makes for a good read. Beloved characters from the Tyrol appear, telling their own stories of strength and hardship, as the ones whom we love find themselves growing and gaining in age,

experience and wisdom as the war wages on around them.

Carolynne says

I found this book improved with a second reading, although I still want to read the hard-back edition. I thought the basic story of the difficult adjustment to school life that the twins, Flora and Fiona McDonald (of course!), experienced was sensitively handled, and even the way-too-perfect Joey was not terribly intrusive this time. The part I didn't like in either reading was the unconvincing spy story--it seemed wildly unlikely, although it gave an opportunity for us to see more of the incorrigible Betty Wynne-Davies, causing trouble once again, and this time it is just too much for the long-suffering headmistress to put up with. Brent-Dyer always does well with her villains and I was gratified to read a bit of Betty's back story. Read along with *The Chalet School in Exile*, the first World War II entry in the series.

Nicola says

Definitely an improvement on the abridged version. The Joey and Jack romance has built much more subtly in the original texts and it's as affecting here as it was in 'Exile'; Robin grew up at some point into a believable character; and the Bettany sisters remain dear to each other in fact and not just the telling. The rather implausible element late in the book is drawn much more sensitively, with an act of wilful faith rather than the supernatural and the mixed feelings others have about it returns to the depth of the Tyrol stories.

(Oh, and I mustn't forget Jem! Dear old grumpy, practical Jem. His and Joey's relationship is a highlight every time it crops up, and his affection for her, Madge, and Jack shines through despite his occasionally gruff treatment of all three.)

(also: Nazis. The Nazi-era stories are wholly rounded in unexpected ways for a novel of this kind and it's a marvel to be wondered at, starting with 'Exile'. 'Goes to It' and 'Highland Twins' continue in the same vein - at least, when unabridged.)

Sue says

A very moving book in the Chalet School series. Flora and Fiona, twins from the Highlands, stay with Jo and family when their home is commissioned by the admiralty. Great excitement, some slight mysticism, and a deeply emotional book. One of the best.

Muriel McIvor says

Love cs xxx

Beth says

OH, THIS IS FANTASTIC. It's much more in line with *The Chalet School in Exile* - here, once again, is a superb war book.

(FINALLY WE FIND OUT HOW DR. JEM IS KNIGHTED. In typical confused Brent-Dyer fashion, it's explained in a rambling aside and has something to do with Birthday Honours.)

Year of publication: 1942. It's jawdropping. At this point, Britain knows the war isn't going to be over any time soon, and they've already suffered a lot, and that's reflected here, even as this is a story told about a pair of eleven-year-old twins. This is direct, but never over-the-top, which means it's subtle for a Chalet School story, and that subtlety serves it well: it means even the preposterous ending is tempered and almost feels real.

To be more direct myself: this is a book about the costs of war. Of people losing their homes, and their family members, and their countries. Of people soldiering on with daily life even as daily life itself becomes more difficult, what with unreliable trains and "Jerry" visiting at night and a shortage of gasoline.

Oh, this is a simple school story with trademark Brent-Dyer quirks, and yet it's also a warm and understanding piece of writing in a way that feels both very much of a specific time - and timeless.
