

## A Series of (Mostly) Uncomfortable, Life-Changing Moments

Laidlaw Reflective Essay | Campbell MacPherson

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### ***At the Funeral of a Mutooro Man, West Uganda***

On a breezy day, perched uncomfortably on a plastic chair above some uneven ground between a banana field and a cluster of parked motorbikes, I sat at a man's funeral whose name I did not know.<sup>1</sup> He had taken his life a few days prior, unable to cope with accusations of thievery and the burdening cost of transport to his mandatory police check-ins, although I only half-caught the details. In one ear, a man who had stepped away from the imam's obituary was chatting loudly over his phone, whilst in the other my supervisor was translating the proceedings from Rutooro into English.



*Banana fields are found almost everywhere  
in West Uganda*

Without a moment's notice, we had to quickly relocate our chairs as the procession carrying the deceased was only a few meters away and heading beyond our direction. As all the men in attendance of this apparently 'small' (but still hundreds-large) funeral began to crowd ourselves around the gravesite, I felt a sense of surrealism that I will perhaps never experience again. How did I get here? And what on earth was I doing?

My Laidlaw journey spanned across four continents,<sup>2</sup> and with varying degrees of intensity, each place provided me with impactful moments of self-reflection where I was left wondering what led me

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1. It is customary in West Uganda that everyone from the neighbouring community attends a funeral, whether they knew the deceased or not. Even as a visitor, I was invited along by the Kibale Forrest Schools Programme (partnered with the Kasiisi Project) staff.
  2. I only passed through Asia to get to Uganda, but the point stands: Laidlaw gave me the opportunity to travel wide, letting me to do new things in new parts of the world.

to this moment and how it would shape me and my future. Although the bizarre situation of being at a stranger's funeral in Uganda was uniquely unusual, and my reflection of this event was (rightfully) not centred around myself, many other moments in Boston, Scotland, and in West Uganda certainly evoked many realisations about who I am as a person, as an aspiring academic, and as someone who wants to experience and positively impact the world.

I want to follow these moments, location by location, and paint a narrative of my Laidlaw experience and my growth over these past eighteen months - what I have learned, how it has changed me, and how it has shaped my life to come.

### ***On the Second Floor, St Mary's College Library***

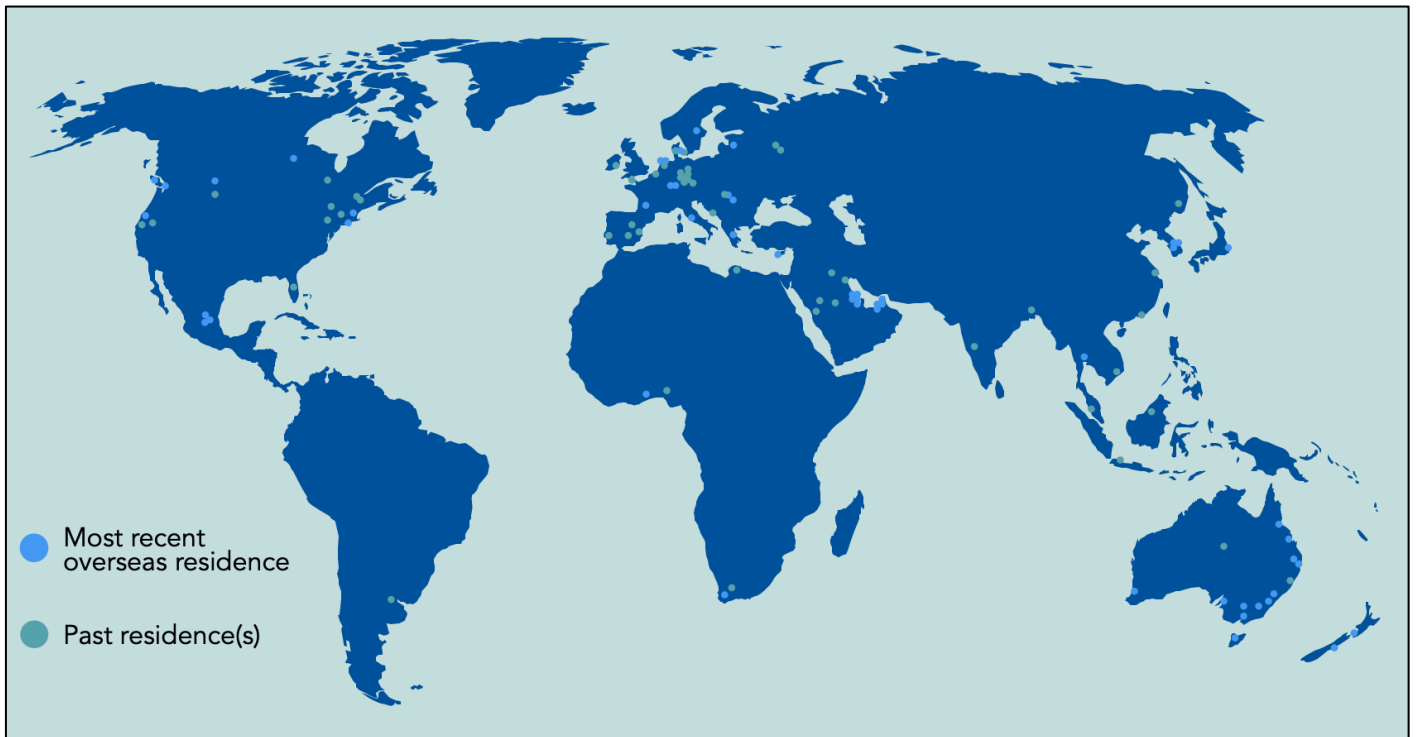
One evening, perched more comfortably this time on and on sturdier ground, I was finalising my Laidlaw research report about the nature of Scottish identity overseas in St Mary's College Library.<sup>3</sup> After interviewing over sixty Scottish individuals, collectively living in over forty different countries, and after concluding my survey with just shy of three hundred responses, I began to reflect on the milestone I had just reached.

For a few years now, I have toyed with the idea of my future being grounded in research academia. However, only after going through my Laidlaw journey did this idea cemented itself as a real, serious, and lasting ambition. Through this research project I proved something about myself - it was something I was good at, something I loved doing, and something I would happily make a career out of later in life. Without boring this essay by describing my new-found love for interview-based qualitative research methodology or the fascinating world of Scottish diaspora studies, I'll leave it at this: Laidlaw gave me the opportunity to discover what I wanted my future to look like and provided me with a huge step to achieve it.<sup>4</sup>

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3. *Scottish Identity Overseas*: <https://laidlawsscholars.network/documents/scottish-identity-overseas-research-report>.

4. Laidlaw not only helped me to discover this path forward, but I consider it to be rather foundational to my potential future career in academia. The journal article I am in the process of writing is using the very data and conclusions I produced in my summer one project, and the research I am planning down the line (in postgraduate study or through other scholarship programmes) will essentially be expanding on my Laidlaw research and pushing it even further.



*A map showing the distribution of all the Scottish expats I interviewed*

As I sat back and looked at my article, at the vast data I had gathered, the conclusions I had drawn, and my critiques and rebuttals of existing academia which I justified with my own evidence, I felt quite satisfied. A sense of satisfaction with academic writing and research I have found hard to achieve so far in my undergraduate studies, because what I had just completed was self-defined, self-directed, and most importantly, new and original. Half of me was still burdened with an unshakable feeling of doubt and fraudulency. As I wrote in one of my blogs when discussing my confidence in talking authoritatively about my research topic, I couldn't "help but think that I am naively walking into a plane which is way out of my depth".<sup>5</sup> But the unhelpful anxieties aside, which is all they were, I realised that I worked hard to contribute new ideas to something I was deeply interested in, and that sparked fresh ambition in me. I wanted to see how far I could push myself and make a career out of research academia.

### ***In Logan International Airport Terminal E, Boston MA***

One afternoon in October 2022, perched uncomfortably once again in a departure lounge, I had just said goodbye to some newly-made friends from what was a busy but deeply enriching weekend in Boston at the Laidlaw Scholars Conference hosted by Tufts University. The experience passed in a

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5. Scots Overseas: Research Blog 03: <https://laidlawscholars.network/posts/scots-overseas-research-blog-03>.

flash, but at Logan International (no thanks to a delayed flight) I had buckets of time to sit and reflect on what I had learned from my experience in America. This was my first time traveling alone and also my first conference, and nerve-rackingly, I did not know anyone in attendance before I jetted off. But in this challenging and very new environment, I discovered how much I thrived in being so far outside of my comfort zone. I arrived anxious for what was to follow, and upon my departure I was sad that it ended so soon.

It is a rare opportunity to be selected and funded for an international conference trip, and an opportunity that I am immensely grateful for. It gave me a taste of traveling with my own work and discussing the research I'm passionate about with like-minded individuals who are genuinely curious



*Traveling in the middle of autumn was pretty amazing too. Scottish autumns do not compare.*



*Presenting my research to the conference*

about what I have spent a long time thinking and writing about. I met dozens of people who each taught me something new and created connections which have lasted to the present day. Similarly to my new-found passion for research academia upon completing my project, I discovered that I loved the whole conference experience and would love for such opportunities to reappear in my future career.

I learned a lot from the contents of conference itself as it presented me with fresh opportunities. I participated in the three-minute speech competition, presenting my research to both the Tufts and UCL conferences which encouraged me to think differently about my research - how do I sell it to a lay audience?

The insightful discussion group exercise where we brainstormed ideas to combat worldwide brain drain (linking nicely to my research specialisation on the Scottish diaspora) really pushed my thinking on how to create ethical, effective, and realistic change. This really stands out to me as a moment which altered the way I think about sustainable global efforts to make positive impacts and got me thinking critically about global issues as I already love to do.

### ***At Kyakatara Primary School, West Uganda***

In the middle of nowhere, perched uncomfortably on the dusty ground and surrounded by curious primary school children, I sat monitoring audio on my laptop while my teammate interviewed a music teacher about the songs and dances he wrote and had his pupils perform for us. We were producing a promotional video for the Kibale Forrest Schools Programme (KFSP), showcasing local school children sharing various conservation and cultural messages through commissioned songs, dances, dramas, and poetry. This was only one of many projects we completed with the KFSP and Kasiisi Project, but it was certainly the most creative and fun. Once more, I took a step back, noticed how extraordinary the moment was, and both my teammate and I agreed: how on earth did we get into doing this?



*Our recording set-up in Kyakatara*

It was a spectacular opportunity, Uganda, and between our various tasks and our travels across the country, it was the highlight of my Laidlaw programme. In addition to coordinating and filming the showcase video, we conducted a study on the state of cultural knowledge and intergenerational knowledge sharing in the Tooro Kingdom for the KFSP, took part in village health teams, and I organised a workshop and supplementary handbook to share my knowledge on interviewing methods, ethics, and recording techniques with the KFSP staff for their forthcoming National Geographic grant project.

Crucially, I was glad that my volunteering in Uganda actually worked to create lasting change and that my presence there was positive and ethical,



*Taking people's blood pressure and temperature as part of a village health team*

something very important to me. I have spoken at length about my opinions on volunteerism and positive alternatives in my essay *Volunteerism to Change Making: What's the Route to Great Impact?*,<sup>6</sup> and my time in Uganda really developed and clarified my thinking on this topic. To support the KFSP, I used my own unique skillset developed from my time in university, school, and even in music and audio production to contribute towards the KFSP's overarching goals and mission whilst simultaneously sharing skills with the staff to create a lasting impact after my departure.

There were many strange and surreal moments in Uganda that I could not have dreamed about experiencing before I actually travelled there, but I got to know a part of the world so different to my own and left it having actually made a positive mark, no matter how incremental.

### ***On a Long-Haul Flight, Doha to Heathrow***

Flying over the Red Sea, reclined in a middle aisle seat and grumbling about the unexplained steel box obstructing my already minimal legroom, I was flying away from my last major event in the Laidlaw programme. After eighteen months of Laidlaw, I had a lot to reflect on.

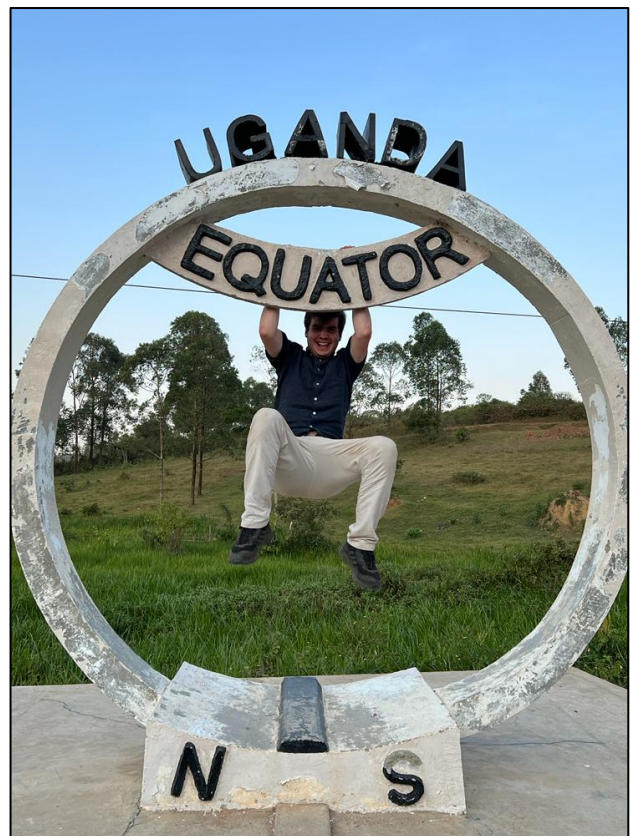
Aside from the travel and research opportunities, the Laidlaw programme encouraged me to think about leadership properly for the first time in my life. Although I was already a leader before the programme, I had never once considered what sort leader I was or thought about the boundaries of my comfort zone. Not only were the Laidlaw leadership training days beneficial at face value, but engaging critically with fellow scholars about the ideas

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6. <https://laidlawscholars.network/posts/volunteerism-to-change-making-what-s-the-route-to-great-impact>

presented was especially constructive. We challenged the extent to which DiSK profiling reveals our comfort zones rather than our strengths, discussed the value of defining of leadership at all, and all in all, we learned a tremendous amount about ourselves as leaders both in the present and future.

I have always been cynical about my value as a researcher, a volunteer, and as a representative of my University. When researching, I sometimes feel like I am 'playing the part' of an academic, unlikely to actually produce anything of value. When volunteering, I feel somewhat undeserving of the great expense payed for my time and effort. When representing the University of St Andrews, I occasionally doubt that I'm truly deserving of such responsibility. Yet, Laidlaw continued to push me, and overtime I began to feel far more confident in my abilities, my value, and my potential. I would go further than to say that this programme was merely the 'next big step' for me into my desired future, because it was a fully-fledged turning point - for my esteem, my passion, and for my belief that 'I can'.



*Taken only a few days before flying back to Scotland*

I already like to think I'm giving back to the Laidlaw Foundation as a soon-to-be alumnus, as I encourage every promising and motivated sub-honours student I meet to apply for the scholarship and I speak highly about the organisation to others. I have also been persistent in voicing my ideas and opinions to the foundation to start productive conversations with various individuals (who I truly thank for listening) to help the Laidlaw programme become even more impactful and an even greater force for good.

I would like to thank the Laidlaw Foundation for empowering me to push myself beyond my university studies and for truly shaping my future for the better, and to also say thank you to everyone else I met, worked with, and learned from across my incredible Laidlaw journey.