

# Ian McCulloch discusses *The Flight of the Heron*

Actor Ian McCulloch recalls his time on 1960s STV series, *The Flight of the Heron*.

By Jonathan Melville



Ian McCulloch as Ewen Cameron Pic: Pic: © STV

With roles in 1970s post-apocalyptic series *Survivors*, wartime drama *Colditz* and a trio of Italian zombie movies, actor Ian McCulloch's career has been a diverse one.

One of McCulloch's first TV roles came in 1968's [The Flight of the Heron](#), an STV drama set during the time of the Jacobites and featuring a host of well-known faces, including Finlay Currie and future Victor Meldrew, Richard Wilson.

Jonathan Melville spoke to the actor about his early career, working on location in the Highlands and the decision not to film the series in colour.

**Jonathan Melville: *The Flight of the Heron* came early in your career - had you done much television before it?**

Ian McCulloch: Up until then I had done very little TV work. I had a long term contract at the RSC and had mainly done stage/classical work. I had sung my own songs on the BBC's *Tonight* programme. One song, "The Rebel", was taken up by revolting students in Paris. The other was an anti-Beatles song which produced the biggest postbag the programme had at that time.

I had also made a record for Decca. Not very successful then but saw it recently on ebay for £150.

Other than that my first acting job on TV was on the *Revenue Men* for BBC Scotland. Directed by [David Andrews](#), an old singing buddy, who was later to direct me in [Take](#)

[\*the High Road\*](#) at STV. While at the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) I was offered the lead in a BBC version of *Kidnapped* but my RSC contract stopped me

**How did you come to be cast in the role of Ewen Cameron?**

I was asked to an interview in London with Brian Mahoney, who at that point was just the producer. I was a great fan of DK Broster's work and hoped I might get the part. It went well but Brian kept a small teddy bear on his desk and it was the bear that you had to impress. The same bear was on the desk when I did *Take the High Road* and he was producing. I was never sure whether it was pure eccentricity or Brian relaxing the interviewees!

I desperately wanted the part and a friendly monk at Ampleforth College said some prayers for me and I said a few (really) in St Martin in the Fields church and the part was mine. Some sort of divine intervention?

**The series was notable for being STV's most expensive programme at the time, made for around £60,000. It was also shown in both a childrens and evening slot. Did you get the feeling it was an important series?**

STV obviously thought it important. £60,000 does not seem much now but they did negotiate the double showing. Frances Essex, after some concerns added his name to the titles. Although they used a still for their Christmas card I didn't feel they plugged it the way they might have done.

The saddest thing about it all was that despite the high production costs, they shot it in black and white. Bearing in mind the costumes and the settings, it was a terrible mistake. It had some good reviews but the BBC did a version only a few years later in glorious colour.

**Finlay Currie, an actor known for his roles in Hollywood movies such as *Quo Vadis* and *Ben-Hur*, was one of your co-stars. Do you remember much about working with him?**

I was a huge fan of Finlay Currie and had many a talk with him. He was pretty ancient then and I think he died the next year.

One thing he told me, which various Internet places seem to challenge, is that he was not a choirmaster, organist or school teacher but that he went to the States at the same time as Charlie Chaplin as a boy soprano. With that nose and his looks it seems improbable, but that was what he said. I think he then worked for Fred Karno.

**Much of the programme was filmed outside, in historically accurate locations. Did this prove awkward for you or the camareman/technicians?**

Using as many of the proper locations was a great idea. Some of them were difficult to get to and in colour they would have been stupendous. It did cause a problem when actor Brown Derby pulled his horse over on top of him and had to be moved at a snails pace by lorry from the middle of nowhere. They did not make enough use of

the Scottish scenery especially as we were generally blessed with good weather and no midges.

**Was it a good set/group of people to work with?**

Everyone got on well with everyone, on set and off. I think most of the leading technicians were London film people. The problems with making a success of the series, apart from the lack of colour, came from Moultrie Kelsall's script, which by any standard was not very impressive.

Secondly Brian, lovely man though he is, should have stuck with producing and left the filming to a more experienced film man. It could have been and should have been much better than it was.

**Today, you're remembered for starring a number of cult TV series and films. Do you ever get asked about *The Flight of the Heron*?**

In all honesty I did not think there was much of a response from anyone. Unlike *Survivors* I was never mobbed, had few fan letters and the series just sort of disappeared off the map.

I thought it was a great pity as I thought it was a great opportunity for STV and me personally. Nothing of much importance happened to me until *Colditz* which led to *Survivors* which led to my three Italian horrors.

I suspect their budgets were closely aligned to that of *The Flight of the Heron*, but they look good and thoroughly professional and have made their Italian producers (not me) a fortune.