

## My Life So Far

Oh, for those perfect days of yesteryear, when life was so sweet o'er the greensward and throughout the oaken manse, when Mum and Pater were paragons of brilliance and devotion, and when one was surrounded by a passel of adoring and unconventional cousins and relatives! Such is the setting for the savory memoir that is *My Life So Far*, a ripe nostalgia trip to rural Scotland in the late 1920's as seen through the eyes of a precocious yet highly innocent 10-year old, Fraser Pettigrew.

Based on a real-life account entitled "Son of Adam" by Sir Denis Forman--now manager of the Royal Opera House in London--the movie takes place wholly within the gardens and suites of the family property, Kiloran House, which also hosts a factory producing sphagnum moss, the family business forcefully supervised by businessman-inventor-squire Edward Pettigrew (Colin Firth). This exquisite property, however, is only Edward's by marriage to Moira (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio) of the Macintosh clan; it is owned, in fact, by matriarch Gamma Macintosh (Rosemary Harris), the mother of Moira who still lives on the place. It is also coveted openly by Moira's brother Morris Macintosh (Malcom McDowell), a crusty, wealthy sybarite of continental flair who would love to take over Kiloran with his new Gallic bride-to-be Heloise (Irene Jacobs).

Once Kiloran's idyllic setting (filmed in Argyll, Scotland) and its resident eccentrics have been lovingly displayed in the opening strophes of the film, it is Heloise's entrance which triggers the plot. A ravishing and dulcet cellist, she captures everyone in the house. Morris is, of course, already smitten, while Gamma is charmed, and Moira, too, quickly finds in Heloise a soul-mate and music-mate (an accomplished pianist, Moira has heretofore buried her talent to manage her household). Upright Edward also becomes besotted, and he makes a clumsy play for her among the moss, a deed which will have repercussions for them all.

Young Fraser (Robbie Norman, in his film debut) is just as taken with Heloise as all the rest. Hers is a delectable aura in his world of manly pursuits (commanded by Dad), worthy studies, and pond swimming. Besides Heloise, his passions are fishing and sneaking into the forbidden books his father keeps in an upstairs room. It is in the latter that he discovers articles on themes like "prostitution," which, with his bookish but utterly naive nature, he seriously introduces as a remunerative option for female members of the family during a dinner party, leading to the one big hoot in a film whose humor is otherwise much more muted. Humiliated, Fraser runs off in snowy weather and catches pneumonia, while Moira's discovering of Heloise's brooch (left behind in the moss episode) rouses her to confrontation with Edward.

Fraser is brought round in time for Kiloran's big winter fest, the *bonspiel*, featuring curling, that unique Scottish invention of sliding granite slabs on ice. The revelry ends in tragedy, however, as Gamma slips through the ice and dies from the effect. Thus the testy question of the inheritance of the estate comes to a head, as does the future of the Pettigrew marriage.

*My Life So Far* brings together for the first time in years the British pair of producer David Puttnam and director Hugh Hudson, who first teamed spectacularly with *Chariots of Fire* (1981). As with the earlier film, the era of the 1920's is again lovingly

recreated, based once more on a true story and featuring a good ensemble cast in multiple story lines. This work, however, is on a more modest scale, with its scope mostly confined to that of a bright child: that which he cannily observes and that which he cannot yet fathom. As adapted from Forman's memoir by screenwriter Simon Donald, the film's point-of-view shifts, giving us glimpses both of Fraser's amiable yet periodically perplexing world, while also letting us in on the more nuanced and troubled relationships of the story's adults. While such an approach threatens inconsistency, it does not prove a major handicap.

The casting is the key ingredient in this kind of confection, and here it is worthy. Irene Jacobs--known both from art films like Kieslowski's *Red* and from commercial pap like *U.S. Marshals*--charms, as she should, from the first with a sweetness that matches her cello's tone. As Edward, Colin Firth (last seen as a bumptious nobleman in *Shakespeare in Love*) shows nicely the range of his working squire, with his romantic stalwartness shading into envious bluster. McDowell, who has been way over the top for years, holds his horses for once to assay a sardonic, yet sympathetic, curmudgeon. Young Master Norman is alternately wide-eyed and wily as Fraser; he punctuates a good bit of the film with his wry narration.

The surprise of the cast is the lone American, Mastrantonio. While recently absent from the screen, she has suddenly shown up--glowingly--both in John Sayles' recent *Limbo* and now in *My Life So Far*. The role is not large or showy, but her accent and look are spot on, and her character's sense of slow betrayal is believable and moving. She acts as a kind of keystone to the edifice that is Kiloran House, a place in time which is no more but which still offers some of its bygone delights in this cinematic visit.

*("My Life So Far" is rated PG-13 for some mild sexual suggestiveness, including that hilarious discussion of prostitution.)*

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