

John Sayles Delivers Epic Battles and Travels in a New Novel

"Jamie MacGillivray" gives readers a sweeping tour of 18th-century history, from Scotland to the American Colonies.

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"An Incident in the Rebellion of 1745," by David Morier, depicts the Battle of Culloden in Scotland, between Jacobite rebels and British forces. Pictorial Press Lt/Alamy

JAMIE MACGILLIVRAY, by John Sayles

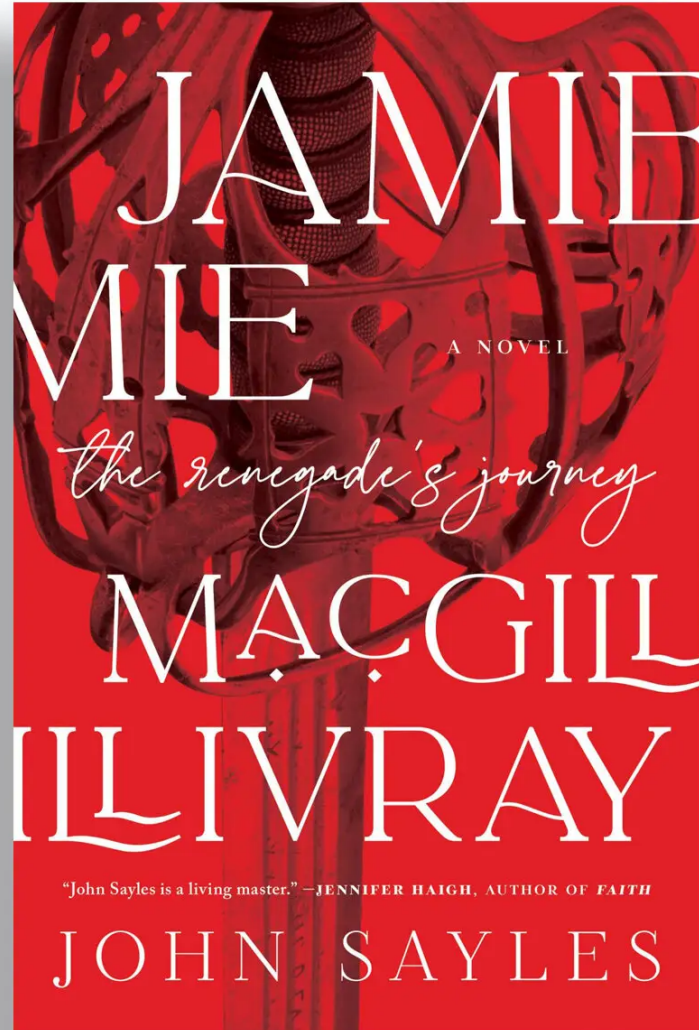
While John Sayles is best known as a screenwriter and director — his films "Passion Fish" and "Lone Star" were nominated for Academy Awards, and he directed the video for "Born in the U.S.A." — it's easy to see why he chose to tell "Jamie MacGillivray" in the form of a novel. As with his previous books "Yellow Earth" (2020) and "[A Moment in the Sun](#)" (2011), this is a vast, epic and multidimensional tale, a larger and more various narrative than any film could hope to contain.

Given the size and scope of Sayles's books — this one is 700 pages, "A

Moment in the Sun" was more than 900 — you would need a "Game of Thrones"-style series to encompass his stories' many convolutions, their teeming casts of characters. But you get the sense that Sayles wants to do something else, to explore the possibilities of this different form and to celebrate precisely what he is able to achieve within the pages of a book that would be impossible on camera. "Jamie MacGillivray" is remarkable in that it manages to be both sweeping and intimate, to deliver to the reader the tides of political history but also a moving and internalized portrait of two young people swept along on these tides.

We first meet our titular hero, Jamie, at the Battle of Culloden, on a moor near Inverness, Scotland. It's 1746 and the "slender, berry-lipped" Young Pretender, Bonnie Prince Charlie, has been routed by Prince William Augustus, "King George's corpulent third son." It's a hinge point of history: one of the concluding acts of the second Jacobite Rebellion, a last, doomed attempt to return the Catholic Stuarts to the throne. It's often said that, for American readers of historical fiction at least, British history skips straight from the Tudors to the Victorians. The 18th century is terra incognita partly because of the complexity and turbulence of its politics, the sense of there being little to hold onto in a shifting, tempestuous age.

Sayles manages the backdrop well, never spoon-feeding facts to the reader, but rather allowing the history to gradually coalesce as the novel's protagonists move through it. Jamie and his older brother, Dougal, come from an old but disenfranchised Scottish line. Previous MacGillivrays had supported King James in the first rebellion, and land and wealth were lost in that defeat. Now, fighting for the Young Pretender, they are seeking not only to overthrow the "German Protestant" who sits on the throne — George II — but also to regain a lost inheritance. Things are not looking good, though. Dougal is wounded almost as soon as the battle starts, while Jamie is captured by English soldiers, having arrived just too late to see action. The brothers are put on board a prison hulk and sent to London, where they will face trial and almost certain execution. They are housed in the notorious Marshalsea Prison, and Sayles gives a number of respectful nods to Dickens, whose father was imprisoned in "the sink of filth and dirt" (as it's described in "The Pickwick Papers").



Among the great pleasures of this novel are the cameo appearances of major figures of their age. The book's chapters are separated into shorter vignettes, most only a page or two long, which skip from one perspective to another (although always returning to and concentrating on Jamie). We meet the Auld Fox, or Lord Lovat, a wily Jacobite leader; we meet the Pamphleteer and the Moralist — Henry Fielding and William Hogarth. But we also spend time viewing the world through the eyes of minor figures: ordinary soldiers in the English Army; the young boy charged with mounting the severed heads

of executed Jacobites on pikes; and Jenny Ferguson, a poor serving girl shunned by her community who gives Jamie brief shelter and is then made to suffer for it. She is transported to the American Colonies, forced to endure "The King's Mercy," which, as one character puts it, involves "sweltering with Africans in some patch of cane."

It's almost a surprise that Jenny goes on to become one of the novel's principal characters, her story weaving in and out of Jamie's, their paths finally crossing again many miles and years from that initial encounter. Jenny's narrative provides a powerful counterpoint to the more traditional, picaresque nature of Jamie's tale. The book is so faithful to its sources of inspiration — the Jacobite memoir of the Chevalier de Johnstone, novels like "Tom Jones" and "Robinson Crusoe" — that without Jenny it would risk being merely a rather stylish act of homage. Instead, it follows another great recent novel of 18th-century life, Francis Spufford's "[Golden Hill](#)," in illuminating a half-forgotten era and imbuing it with a powerful modern intelligence. And in Jenny, Sayles has created a spiky, self-possessed hero, a character of memorable life and wit.

"Jamie MacGillivray" is Sayles's sixth novel — his first was published in 1975 — and by some distance his best. It gets under the skin of this extraordinary time in a way that few historical novels do. Sayles writes superbly about the confusion of warfare and deals equally well with the horrors of the plantations. His characters fall in love, lose their loved ones, see their hopes dashed and rise again, and the reader is with them every step of the way. That's not to say it's a perfect book. Dialect in dialogue goes a long way and, certainly to this Anglo-Scot, there's a little too much "hoots, mon!" from the Scottish characters and an "alright, guvnor?" geezerishness from the English. The novel dwells more than it needs to on the habits and lore of the Indigenous peoples Jamie encounters — here there is too much telling and not enough showing.

When folks from the film industry stoop to novel-writing, it's natural to feel a bit queasy. John Sayles, though, is the real deal. This is a first-rate historical novel told with wit, verve and a subtle understanding of the mechanics of the genre.

Alex Preston is the author of four novels, most recently "Winchelsea."

JAMIE MACGILLIVRAY | By John Sayles | 696 pp. | Melville House | \$24.99

