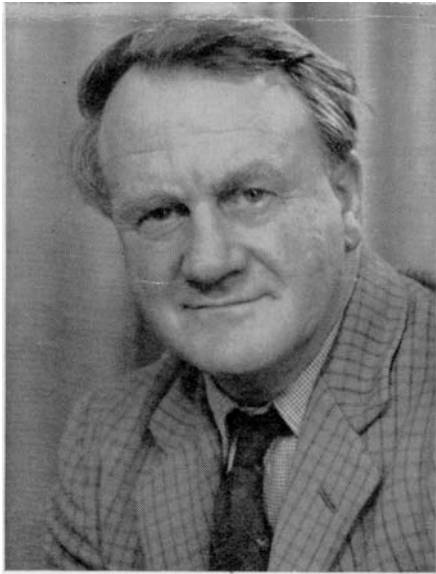


## Sea Adventures: Peter Dawlish (James Lennox Kerr), a Writer Amongst Artists

Dr Stephen Bigger, University of Worcester

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### Peter Dawlish (pseudonym for James Lennox Kerr) 1899-1963.



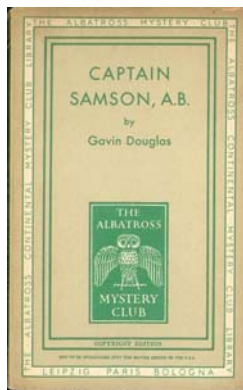
James ('Jimmy') Lennox Kerr was born in Paisley, Renfrewshire on 1 July 1899 and died 11 March 1963. He wrote 55 books under the names **J Lennox Kerr**, **Lennox Kerr**, **Peter Dawlish** and **Gavin Douglas**. His use of the name Peter Dawlish began with his Oxford UP contracts in 1938 and was then used for all children's books (or more accurately books for boys). There had been three earlier books for children using his own name. The name **Gavin Douglas** was used for thrillers at first, and later for a group of post-war adult books that make no reference to J Lennox Kerr books. His books were generally adventure stories about the sea, with some post-war documentaries about the navy, ships in trouble, and diving. He produced one anthology of stories in an annual for boys, and contributed to other annuals. He wrote in total 32 books for children and 23 for adults. He saw himself as a storyteller rather than a novelist.

JLK's biographical details are easy to access, as he wrote three autobiographical works between 1930 and 1940, and his early dust-jackets, especially the American edition of *Back Door Guest* (see below) carried considerable biographical detail. *The Eager Years*, (1940) is the most significant. His son and neighbours still live in his Cornish village and have been generous with their time and friendship.

Born a working class boy in Paisley, he became an apprentice butcher but ran away to sea. He signed on in 1915 as a 15 year old, claiming to be 18; after the war he joined the Merchant Navy, during which he spent a little time as a tramp in Australia, having jumped ship. In seeking to return to England, he became stranded on Java. Arriving in New York, he found some work but soon began to travel around America as a hobo (tramp), jumping trains and living rough. Then he found work on a ship that went to the Arctic: this became the subject of several early books, including *The Eye of the Earth* for children. He finally arrived in London in 1929, where he lived cheaply in Pimlico and started to write seriously. He met and married Elizabeth Lamorna ("Mornie") Birch in 1932 so was the son-in-law of S.J. ("Lamorna") Birch, the artist and Royal Academician working in Cornwall (see Wormleighton, 1995 for details). He wrote occasional short stories, at first in Australia (none of these are now known) and for naval publications like *Nautical Magazine* and *Blue Peter* (he refers to this in *A Tale of Pimlico*). I have so far located the story *Old Bill – Tutor* by Lennox Kerr spanning two pages in *The Blue Peter* volume 11 1931.



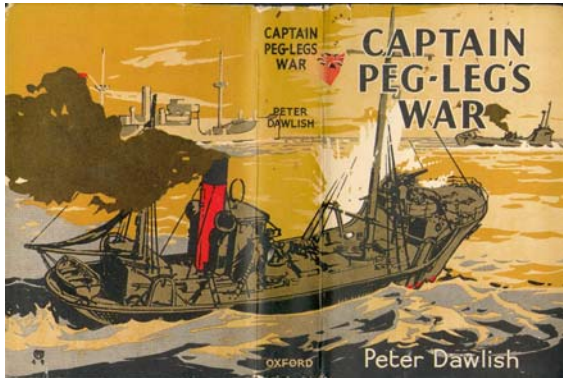
His first book, *Back Door Guest* (1930) was the autobiographical story of his year travelling and working in America where he learnt to live and jump trains as a hobo (tramp) when his money was stolen in the depression. This gave him the subject for his first book, *Back Door Guest* his own story of travelling rough around America: the dust jacket shows two men (one black, one white) sitting on the roof of a train. His early writings reflected his experiences as a sailor – *Old Ship* (1930), and *Ice* (1933) set in the Arctic. His arctic adventure for boys, *Eye of the North*, comes from this time and in this we can see his own adventures replicated. This is the first of many story-lines for children that have autobiographical roots.



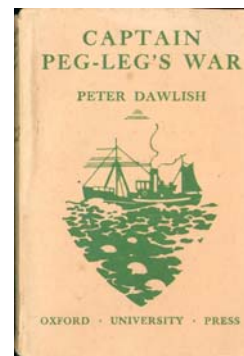
He settled in Pimlico, London, writing and odd-jobbing to pay his rent. He enjoyed some small success (fame but not fortune) with Collins in the 1930s, particularly with detective fiction using the name **Gavin Douglas** and featuring three sea stories of an idiosyncratic and ‘obstinate’ sea captain, Captain Samson, and one story of petty crime in London, featuring a blue sedan car. The picture shows a curious “Albatross” paperback edition published in Europe before the war and not for sale in the British Empire or USA. It has a dust-jacket identical with the cover. His two Glenshiels titles focus of Scotland’s Calvinistic culture; *The Fool and His Tractor* is set in Australia, describing a man fruitlessly ploughing his worthless tract of land. The autobiographical adventure *Cruising in Scotland*, began when Kerr bought and refurbished an old lifeboat (funded by Collins the publisher with a down-payment of £25) and sailed in leisurely fashion with the Birch family who wanted only to stop and paint. The result is an intimate family portrait with considerable sailing interest, accompanied by paintings by S.J ‘Lamorna’ Birch.

He first began to write for children under his own name, **J Lennox Kerr** in a contract for three books in the 1930s published for Thomas Nelson. These were unfortunately not dated by the publisher, but are registered under their acquisition dates by the copyright libraries. The first was an apparently factual book about ships and sailing, *The Young Steamship Officer*, (1933) which his new sister-in-law Joan Birch illustrated. It describes a variety of ships and how to sail in them, not only for would-be sailors but also for interested boys. One interesting section, described as “a true story” describes the authors first trip from persuading the captain to take him on to the actual journey. That this is not a true story can be told from the fact that it sailed from Sunderland (he sailed from Glasgow) and was called the SS Nantewas: he had met his wife Mornie Birch and moved to Cornwall where he lived in a cottage called Nantewas. The story may to true to life; but it is not autobiographical. His second boys’ book was a Cornish smuggling adventure illustrated by the artist Rowland Hilder, (a friend of the Birch family). *The Blackspit Smugglers* (1935) placed a gang of smugglers in a remote Cornish cove, using caves accessed from a remote cottage. The hero Tom Rennie almost loses his life but the gang is rounded up by the destroyer *Corinthian* – the original dustjacket has a superb picture, painted by Rowland Hilder, of the destroyer catching the small smack *Shark* in its searchlights. He picture was both the cover and the frontispiece, and is odd in the sense that as a cover it did not carry any words, which were kept to the spine. The third story was *The Eye of the Earth* (1936) which strongly echoes Lennox Kerr’s early adult books. His

juvenile character travels as a hobo after being robbed of his money and ends up on an Arctic steamer pursued by a villain. The hero, a young boy, William is summoned to rescue his father in the Canadian Arctic and find a goldfield against murderous opposition from Bully Keats. After his funds are stolen William is taught by his mentor and journey companion how to jump trains with the hobos. He is of course reunited with his father.

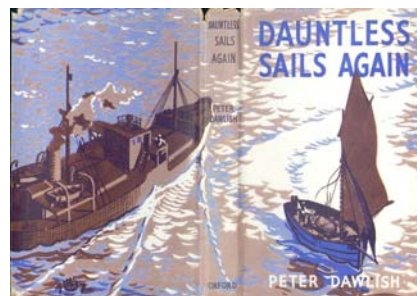
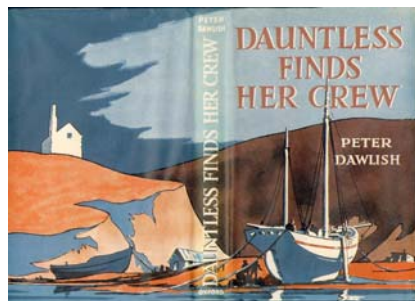


A new contract for Oxford University Press established the pseudonym **Peter Dawlish**. The new name had a nautical feel as the port of Dawlish in south west England has strong naval connections. His Captain Samson (in his Gavin Douglas stories) he transformed into the equally irascible and stubborn Captain Peg-Leg Johnston in four Peg-Leg



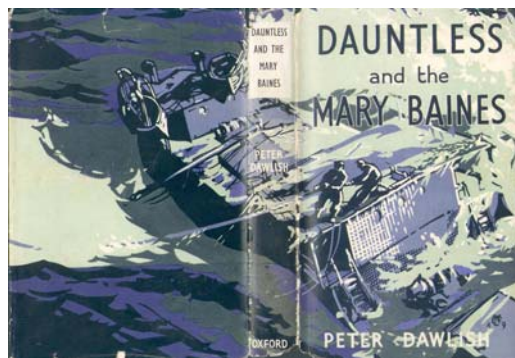
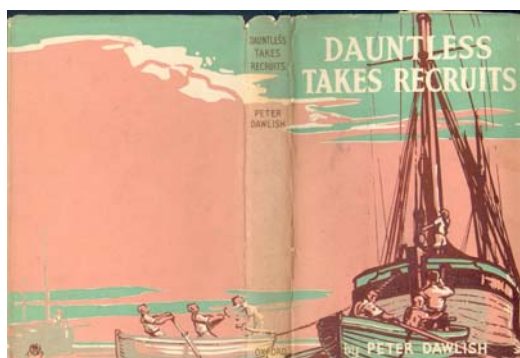
adventures written and published around the outbreak of the second world war (1939-40). One story is based loosely on the Spanish civil war (*Captain Peg-Leg's War*, 1939), another set in the arctic (*Peg-Leg and the Fur Pirates*, 1939). There followed two early second world war stories, *Peg-Leg Sweeps the Sea*, and *Peg-Leg and the Invaders* (both 1940) show peg-leg trying to win the war single handed. There were austerity paperbacks, (illustrated).

His writing halted as he went to sea again during world war II, first in the British Mercantile marine and from 1942 in the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve, in which he was involved in minesweeping and similar coastal duties, and supporting the D-day landings at Omaha Beach in 1944: he was mentioned in despatches.

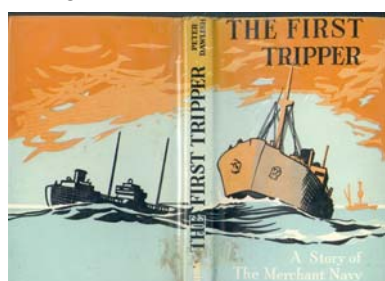


His post-war years were very productive using all three pen-names. As Peter Dawlish, he began to work on his Dauntless series of seven books (1947-60) of teenage boys restoring and sailing in a French Crabber: this cemented his popularity. The boys were the age of his own son, and the series was clearly inspired by family sailing experiences. It was for this series that Peter Dawlish became best known and John Goodchild republished the series, albeit with some changes to titles, in the 1980s. In translation, the 'Dauntless' was given other names more understandable to non-English audiences – such as the 'Nelson' in Holland, and 'Dolphin' in Sweden. The excellent illustrations are by P.A. Jobson. The neglected French crabber, which had brought refugees over in 1941, starts as a development project for the five boys David Maitland, Tim Baron, Bob Costley, Bruce Cox, Alex Simpson (there is a mysterious Dick in the first story, p.10, probably an error), supported by their mentor Captain Blake. They fix the boat up, sail up to Skye and have many adventures, including a fight with some tykes in Poplar (rough city kids, the "Poplar Pirates" of the reprint edition) which led to

peace terms and later friendship. A one-third length novel called *Sailors All!* was produced for Basil Blackwell in the compendium *Five More* (sequel to *Six of the Best*) which has the boys sailing to the Scottish coast. This appeared also bound separately. The series ends with the *Dauntless* tearfully handed back to its original French owners, after exposing a traitor.



Alongside the Peter Dawlish stories, he gave children a feel for Navy



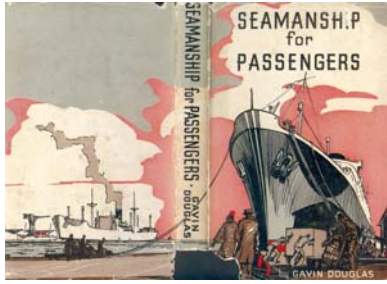
Life, first through *The First Tripper*, in a careers story series, following a cadet through his first sea voyage to Alexandria and Australia, showing clearly the delights and tribulations of being crew, and the qualities and temperament required. The frontispiece by Jobson is also illustrated here. He later developed information books for



young people about the sea, the merchant navy and the royal navy.

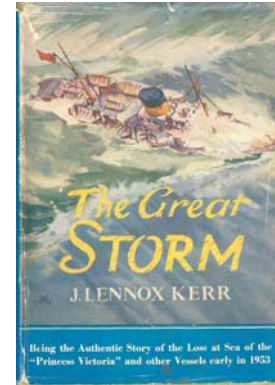
Often autobiographical, Kerr ('Peter Dawlish') uses his own experience as a Scottish apprentice butcher running away to sea to Australia as the main plot of *McLellan's Lake* (1951): the young hero's father is in trouble gold-prospecting in Australia and a mysterious message causes his son to run away from home with his aunt, join on a ship's crew where unbeknown the villain is the cook. He finds his father imprisoned and is himself imprisoned before rescue by friends. Its sequel was *The Bagoda Incident* (1953) where the same villain, Fancy Jack, is uncovered running a racket on a cruise liner. Both stories give a vivid portrait of life as ship's crew. *North Sea Adventure* (1949) takes place on a trawler; and *Way for a Sailor* (1955) is for younger children, with children playing at being sailors until one, so fired up to go to sea, persuades the captain of a small boat to take him on. For the Christmas stocking, *Sea Story Omnibus* (1956) contained stories, pictures and activities for the young sailor. An adult biography of the arctic explorer Wilfred Grenfell led to the children's story *The Race for Gowrie Bay* in the same year (1959), a first tripper Arctic tale in which a young boy finds himself in the middle of an exploitative dispute to steal his family's traditional fishing grounds. This is a very profound story.

He wrote a number of maritime historical stories: *Young Drake of Devon* (1954) and *He Went with Drake* (1955) tells the familiar history of Sir Francis Drake in story form. *Martin Frobisher* (1956) explores maritime exploration. *Aztec Gold* (1958) has an 17<sup>th</sup> century boy journeying to the Americas to rescue his brother who has been captured by Aztecs. *The Boy Jacko* (1962) describes an 18<sup>th</sup> century journey by Matthew Tuke to find his wealthy uncle and guardian in colonial America. Only the street-wise urchin Jacko keeps him from disaster as villains seek to impersonate him to get the money. Both of these books found their way onto the school curriculum.



For adults, he completed three stories for the publishers Robert Hale as Gavin Douglas, *A Tale of Pimlico*, *The Scuffler* and *The Struggle*; and a guide to seamanship for ship passengers, describing the various processes on board ship, published by John Lehman (a repeat in part of his 1933 work for young people, *The Young Steamship Officer*).

As Lennox Kerr, he became a maritime historian, dealing with past and recent history (the Birkenhead of 1850 and the Victoria of 1953) as well as collecting oral recollections of navy life in war years and writing historical appreciations of naval services. As Lennox Kerr he described the sinking of “the unfortunate ship” the Birkenhead in the 1850s with great loss of life (*The Unfortunate Ship*, 1960) and more recently the sinking of the *Victoria* in the great storm of 1953 which caused the east coast floods (*The Great Storm* 1954). This is a brilliant contemporary account of those events from a sailor’s point of view, probably the best that exists. He brings together the wartime stories of sailors in *Wavy Navy* and *Touching the Adventures ... of Merchantmen in the Second World War*, where some stories are ghost written and JLK appears under all three of his aliases. His arctic experiences led to a close relationship with Wilfred Grenfell and his biography of this great benefactor in this region is probably his most available book today. The family links still continue.



A former merchant navy man, his output is maritime and his locations and ships (e.g. steamers, minesweepers, trawlers, coasters and yachts) reflect his own experiences. His socialist values reflect the loyalty of friends, the destructiveness of greed, the dignity of labour, the importance of doing a job well and an explicit critique of self-serving managers and those who expect others to provide for their needs (especially the moneyed class living without working on dividends based on the hard work of others). Life in his books is tough, and to be lived tough. His boys shoot, or throw knives, to kill where villains need to be taken in hand. Success, and survival, lies in personal competence, dedication and ingenuity. The war years encapsulated all these, and Jimmy Kerr gave time and energy to charting the bravery of mariners everywhere during wartime emergencies. Geoffrey Trease (1964:140f) identifies the Peter Dawlish works as quality successors of Arthur Ransome in writing stories of holiday adventures, naming him together with Gary Hogg, David Severn, Malcolm Saville and M E Atkinson. It is really a shame that these are now forgotten.

### References.

- Doyle, Brian (1978) ‘Peter Dawlish’ in *Twentieth Century Children’s Writers*, edited by D L Kirkpatrick, Macmillan (the bibliography is problematic).
- Kerr, J L (1940) *The Eager Years* (autobiography, Edinburgh: Collins)
- Trease, Geoffrey (1964) *Tales Out of School*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.
- Wormleighton A (1995) *A Painter Laureate: Lamorna Birch and his Circle* (Bristol: Sansom & Company) – biography of the whole family and artist friends.

**Annex 1: Jacket blurb of the American edition of JL Kerr's first book, *Back Door Guest*.**  
Back:



In 1915 Lennox Kerr celebrated his first long trousers by quitting his job in a butcher's shop and enlisting in the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve. He was fifteen. He had to say he was eighteen. He served in the Dover Patrol, in the transport service, and with the submarine chasers. The day before the Armistice he was wrecked in a trawler.

He was born in Paisley in Scotland, the son of a mill-girl and a man who quoted Euclid and rose from ship's fireman to chief engineer.

After the war Lennox Kerr went into the merchant service as able seaman, visiting most of the countries of the world in all sorts of ships. Then from a brief experience as commercial traveler in the north of Ireland he jumped to Australia, where he wandered around as a "swaggie" (tramp), ran a dance hall and taught dancing, cleared scrub, trapped rabbits, did publicity for a new district, was cook and drover and worked in all manner of odd jobs.

From the first he had looked forward to a career in writing. Everywhere he was a chiel among them takin' mental notes, while he beheld this world so wide and went about for to admire and for to see. In Australia he sold his first short stories.

He returned to London, signed on a German steamer, was laid up with malaria in Java, went beachcomber, and worked his way home in another German boat to which the Dutch authorities had escorted him.

Once more in England, nearly broke but full of ideas, he sold two stories that were given much publicity but hardly boiled the pot. So he signed on the *Berengaria*.

Then came the American experience described in *Back Door Guest*. Signed on the *Baychimo*, which he thought would take him home, he discovered, too late, that it was a Hudson Bay supply ship, bound for an arctic voyage. It was a grand adventure but the voyage took sixteen months before he landed in London where he wanted so desperately to write. Even then he took flu in an eight-shilling room. A kind-hearted landlady to the rescue made possible *Back Door Guest*. And now, says Mr. Kerr, Santa Claus has arrived.

**Inside flaps:**

Countless British visitors have viewed us with suave condescension from the top down; Lennox Kerr views America from the bottom up. And yet that is perhaps the least important element in the exciting narrative of this young Scotchman's hobo wanderings: for out of its wealth of adventure, tragedy, romance, and sheer entertainment, what one finally brings is the intimate knowledge of another human being who has revealed himself with unusual honesty.

He had wandered widely and seen a great deal of the world for a man not yet turned thirty, when he jumped ship in New York. For a long time he had been trying to write, and after various kinds of work in New York, he had a little luck with the magazines. It doesn't last however, and finally he starts out to work his way westwards and see the country.

Motorists pick him up, so hiking is easy; sometimes he gets a job and works a few days before he goes on. Through his eyes we see the inside of "flop houses", those last stands of the beaten; missions were for listening to the sermon one can earn a cup of coffee and a bun; the forecastle of a lake steamer; and finally the inside of freight cars and hobo "jungles".

Gradually the wanderlust that Kerr has fought all his life gets him. He cannot settle down to any sort of job – not with the lure of Farther-On always calling. And slowly, insidiously, the hobo philosophy begins to take possession of him too. Only fools work when it is so easy to live without working.... He loses all ambition; old Mary, who knows a great deal about men because she has known so many, warns him that when he loses his pride, there will be no hope. He ceases to care whether he is clean or dirty; he no longer boasts of the stories he has sold, the novel he expects to write. When the passing motorists speed up instead of offering him a ride, he sees what he has become; but it is a kick in the pants from a policeman's heavy boot that arouses him to his real degradation.

Lennox Kerr's narrative is a genuine human document. His experiences were founded on no undertaken adventure searching for copy; what happened to him grew out of dire necessity. He is one of the millions of the submerged who has found a voice.

## Annex 2. List of books.

### A. For young people (total 32)

#### As J Lennox Kerr or Lennox Kerr

**The Young Steamship Officer.** Thomas Nelson (as J Lennox Kerr, Nelsonian Series No.17) 1933

**The Blackspit Smugglers** Thomas Nelson (as Lennox Kerr Nelsonian Series No.29) n.d. 1935, reissued 1954 in Triumph Series illustrated by Rowland Hilder

**The Eye of the Earth** Thomas Nelson, n.d. 1936 illustrated by J.P. Paterson, New Era series; later (1939) The Coronet Library No 6; reissued 1955 in Triumph Series.

#### As Peter Dawlish

**Captain Peg-Legs War** London: Oxford University Press, 1939.

**Peg-Leg And The Fur Pirates** London: Oxford University Press 1939

**Peg-Leg Sweeps The Sea** London Oxford University Press 1940.

**Peg-Leg and the Invaders** London: Oxford University Press, 1940.

**Dauntless Finds Her Crew** Oxford University Press, 1947.

**Dauntless Finds a Crew** Wendover: John Goodchild Publishers, 1984.

**De "Nelson" krijgt haar bemanning** Den Haag, Leopold 1963

**Dauntless Sails Again** Oxford University Press, 1948

**Dauntless And The Mary Baines.** 1949. Oxford University Press.

**Dauntless and the Wreck of the Mary Baines** Wendover: John Goodchild, 1985.

**Dauntless Takes Recruits** London: Oxford University Press 1950.

**Dauntless And The Poplar Pirates** Wendover: Goodchild, 1985.

**Dauntless Sails In** Published by Oxford University Press. 1952.

**Dauntless In Danger** London: Oxford University Press, 1954.

**Dauntless and the smugglers** Wendover: Goodchild, 1984.

**Sailors All!** Oxford: Basil Blackwell (published separately, initially a story in *Five More*, edited by Geoffrey Trease, sequel to *Six of the Best*), 1957.

**Dauntless Goes Home** London: Oxford University Press, 1960.

#### Other stories

**North Sea Adventure**, Oxford University Press 1949

**Aztec Gold** England: Oxford University Press, 1951.

**MacClellan's Lake** London, Oxford University Press 1951.

**The Bagodia Episode** Oxford. University Press.1953

**Young Drake of Devon** Oxford University Press 1954.

**He Went With Drake**; illustrated by P.A. Jobson. L: George G. Harrap, (1955)

**Martin Frobisher**: Oxford University Press, 1956.

**Way for a Sailor**, Oxford University Press, 1955

**The Race for Gowrie Bay.** London. Oxford University Press. 1959.

**The Boy Jacko** London: Oxford University Press 1962

#### Other books

**The First Tripper. A Story of the Merchant Navy** Oxford University Press, 1947

**Sea Story Omnibus** London: Collins, 1956.

**Johnno The Deep-Sea Diver - The Life-story of Diver John Johnstone as told to Peter Dawlish** London. Harrap 1960.

**The Seas Of Britain** London: Ernest Benn 1963.

**The Royal Navy.** Oxford University Press 1963.

**The Merchant Navy** Oxford University Press, 1966.

**B. Books for Adults (total 23).**

As Lennox Kerr

- 1930 **Back Door Guest** Constable & Co  
1930 **Old Ship** Constable & Co  
1932 **Glenshiels**  
1933 **Ice** The Bodley Head  
1935 **The Woman from Glenshiels** Collins  
1936 **The Fool and the Tractor** Collins  
1938 **Cruising in Scotland** Collins  
1940 **The Eager Years** Collins. Autobiography.

1939-45 War service.

- 1950 **Wavy Navy** George Harrap  
1953 **Touching the Adventures ... of Merchantmen in the Second World War** Edited stories of sailors, George Harrap  
1954 **The Great Storm** George Harrap. The story of the great storm of 1953 and the sinking of the Victoria in Scottish waters.  
1957 and Wilfred Granville, **The RNVR – A Record of Achievement** George Harrap  
1959 **Wilfred Grenfell** George Harrap [Dodd, Mead in USA]  
1960 **The Unfortunate Ship** George Harrap. The story of the sinking of the Birkenhead in the 1850s  
1962 **Harbour Spotter**

As Gavin Douglas

- 1935 **Rough Passage** Collins = *The Tall Man, New York G P Putnam's Sons 1936*  
1936 **The Obstinate Captain Samson** Collins / *New York G P Putnam's Sons 1937*  
1937 **Captain Samson AB** Collins  
1938 **The Search for the Blue Sedan** Collins  
1948 **A Tale of Pimlico** Robert Hale  
1949 **The Scuffler** Robert Hale  
1949 **Seamanship for Passengers** John Lehman, London  
1951 **The Struggle** Robert Hale

Stephen Bigger. 2007.