

See me?

By The Unreliable Narrator

Welcome to the first edition of *The Bottle Imp*, the ezine of the Scottish Writing Exhibition. Why *The Bottle Imp*? The name, of course, is stolen from one of Stevenson's short stories. The story itself has deep European roots, drawn from – amongst other influences – Germanic folklore: but Stevenson reaches fully half around the world to tell his tale, set in the South Seas, and told for a Samoan audience. As a symbol of Scotland's ability to see beyond itself, to go outside its borders – whether for honour, or for glory, or for riches, or even just for the climate – it seemed appropriate. We hope that we, too, might contain something surprising!

Scottish writing, outside Scotland, often finds itself submerged beneath the simplified term “British Literature”: yet Britain is a complex artificial construct, and there are many ways of being – and NOT being – British. Tricks are being missed here; angles are not being covered. Pull the stopper out from Britain, and all manner of creatures are liable to pop out – not the least of them that many-headed country Scotland, the stateless nation, North Britain, Caledonia, Auld Scotia, Alba... Scotland small? Our multiform, our infinite Scotland *small*?

It punches above its weight, this old nation on Europe's north-western fringe, on the edge of the edge. We drew up a social contract between ruler and ruled long before Rousseau: the 14th-century Declaration of Arbroath has been held up by everyone from tourist boards to teary patriots (on both sides of the Atlantic) as an inspiration to the US Declaration of Independence. Our Enlightenment lit the globe and changed the world: those of you we met at last year's MLA in Philadelphia may remember Voltaire's quote, “We look to Scotland for all our ideas of civilisation”. (It's all over the internet, that line, and we were by no means the first to use it: but where is its source?) We've always been an inventive people, we Scots. James Hutton pondered the crags that poke through Edinburgh's thin skin, and gave the world Deep Time; Lord Kelvin reached down to draw the universe's bottom line; James Clerk Maxwell, with his demon, wrote the equations which lit the way for Einstein. The Industrial Revolution, power and process, was another of our hard-edged gifts to the world. To get specific, we also

lay claim to – a few brief highlights here: try picturing a world without them – the telephone and television, the bicycle and the pneumatic tyre, anaesthesia and antiseptics, penicillin and the breech-loading rifle. Scotland, midwife to the modern age. Here's tae us, wha's like us?

Wherefrom, then, the origin of this Scottish exceptionalism? Simply put, we were the first literate nation. The men and women of Scotland could read and write when the overwhelming bulk of European society could not. No wonder, then, at the scale of our impact on literature. No wonder that we created the first secular mass culture. Macpherson's Ossian enchanted everyone from Goethe to Bonaparte, dragged Mendelssohn to the Hebrides and laid the foundations of European Romanticism; Lord Byron ganged a-roving, far from his childhood home above an Aberdeen fish-shop; Edinburgh's journals cooked up literary criticism into a profession; and Sir Walter Scott's blockbusters swept a global readership along in his wake. James Hogg received fan mail from the young Brönte sisters; George MacDonald and R.M. Ballantyne conjured children's literature into being; Stevenson psychoanalysed the 19th century; Conan Doyle plotted out the laws of detective fiction; and Buchan put a razor's edge onto the thriller.

What have we done for you lately? We-ell, there's a question, today when the world's best-known Scotsman is Groundskeeper Willie. Take a look inside ...

The Bottle Imp is, as you may have guessed, argumentative, polemic and opinionated. Fair and balanced we are not. We're a launchpad, a kick-off point: you'll find information here, on books and writers, and articles which we hope might set a spark, and help you, maybe, to see through the problematic fogs of history and nation. Scotland, as the man said, is a state of mind. Enjoy!

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