

Believe it or not

By The Unreliable Narrator

Religion is a literary exercise: stories, fables, parables. It is wrapped up in beginnings, and most especially endings, judgements and deserts just, unjust, and wandered-through, as well. Even in its pre-literate beginnings, Scotland's religions have been made of stories, told and re-told. Callanish's great lunar temple rolls around still on a circle of 18.61 years, telling the same tale of earth and moon, working to a cosmic clock that will be aeons in the running down. The mummies of Cladh Hallan squatted in the peat-smoke for near on a thousand years between them, grinning eyeless out as their descendants walked through their own cycles of alphas and omegas. Sun and moon, life and death were etched out in everything from cup-and-rings to the hieratic curls, crescents and creatures of the Picts. Religion has long made its mark on Scotland.

The written story arrived with Christianity, which had two bites at Scotland: first, in the south-west, came St Ninian; then, from Ireland, came St Columba. Ninian was gentle, kind, wise; he is seldom remembered. Columba, Colum Cille, the Dove of the Church, duffed up druids and shouted down the Loch Ness Monster. His two-fisted faith played better with the locals, and most of the credit for conversion tends to go his way. He missed his chance to become Scotland's patron saint, though, his relics trumped by a few Apostolic fragments. But his poem, *Altus Prosator*, is often claimed as the first work of Scottish literature; and what may have been some small part of him was carried in a silver casket before Bruce's army at Bannockburn.

In many ways, the geographical, political and emotional expression we call Scotland owes its very existence to religion. On the chessboard of ecclesiastical authority, bishop clashed with bishop, seeking primacy. Scotland's medieval Church, short of an archbishopric, outmanoeuvred the thrones of York and Durham both and was adopted as a Special Daughter of the Pope. Lines were drawn, and words were written; Scotland was graven into history before most of its inhabitants had ever heard of it.

But the Special Daughter, as they often do, turned away from Papa. In England,

Protestantism of a sort came from the top down, thrust onto the people by the loins of King Henry. Scotland's Reformation, though, came roaring out the trumpet throat of John Knox, and powered through the population from the bottom up. The Presbyterianisms of Knox and Calvin swept through the nation like a fever, dragging literacy in its wake: everyone must read the Bible, male and female, young and old, rich and poor. Scotland became Europe's first literate country which produced the Scottish Enlightenment, and the Great Atheist, and bootstrapped into being the rational and scientific age. Alphas and omegas, beginnings and endings.

Scotland now is largely areligious, or at least irreligious: the pews get emptier each year; no church now stands on Glasgow's Church Street. But there's no doubting that, while it lasted, Scotland's peoples were enthusiastic in their beliefs. Perhaps it was inevitable that such serious enthusiasm did not sit well with organised obedience, and Scottish writers have not been backwards about coming forwards. From the pre-Reformation reforming appeals of Sir David Lyndsay's *Ane Satire of the Thrie Estaitis*, to the sideswipes of Robert Burns in *Holy Willie's Prayer*, to the ravings of James Hogg's *Justified Sinner*, religious criticism forms a strong tradition in Scottish literary culture. Grim Calvinism, even in this unbelieving age, remains a common target of Scotland's authors and poets: although too one often finds informed, intelligent and hopeful faith, if not in God then at least in humanity itself, as in the poetry of Edwin Morgan. And of course other religions have settled here now. New territories are opened up, new combinations of literary traditions and religious ones.

In this issue, Scottish author James Robertson – no stranger to a religious theme – examines the work of Dugald Buchanan, in **Judge Not Lest Ye Be Judged?**, and also gives us his **Bible Talk**. Gerard Carruthers launches an investigation into the **Diabolic**, Maggie Scott explores the cultural diversities of **modern Glasgow**, and Suhayl Saadi gives us his short story **Bandanna**, with coded author commentary, and a new novella, **The Spanish House**. All this and our regular columns too await you within *The Bottle Imp* 3.

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