

# Their Knife in Your Glands

## By The Unreliable Narrator

In medicine the most practitioners,  
Lechis, surrigianis and phisicianis,  
Thame self fra ded may not supple:

*Timor mortis conturbat me.*

—William Dunbar, 'Lament for the Makaris, Quhen He Was Seik'

The Scots have a peculiar relationship with medicine. On the one hand, we have pioneered many of the most important developments in medical science: world-shaking highlights include, but are by no means limited to, the clinical trial; the general anaesthetic; the hypodermic syringe; penicillin; beta-blockers; ultrasound scanners; full-body MRI; the Glasgow coma scale; and apoptosis. On the other, we might consider the deep-fried Mars bar; alcoholism; and the phrase “just an ordinary sword”. It is remarkable that so much effort has been expended in the fight against sickness and untimely death by a nation whose people sometimes seem to pursue those ends with such wanton abandon.

Scotland’s medical schools blossomed in the Enlightenment, and Scottish doctors and surgeons came to dominate the field. It’s not surprising, then, that there should be such an overlap in Scotland between leeches and letters. Of course, a medical story, like crime fiction, has its drama built in from the start: no need to search for tension when your characters come pre-equipped with sharp instruments and an interest in blood. But there’s also a tradition of Scottish physicians putting down the scalpel and picking up the pen—Patrick Abercrombie, John Arbuthnot, Iain Bamforth, A. J. Cronin, Arthur Conan Doyle, Martin MacIntyre, Suhayl Saadi, Tobias Smollett, and Gael Turnbull are a few notable examples. Perhaps it’s the heightened awareness of life and death; perhaps it’s the regular parade of characters in crisis that pass before you. For authors and doctors alike, a certain godlike authority must come with the job.

So now we must wash our hands, stretch this issue of *The Bottle Imp* out upon the slab, lift up a large flap in the right frontal region anteriorly and laterally, and cast a forensic eye across its innards. Sir Kenneth Calman dissects [A. J. Cronin’s \*The Citadel\*](#), a novel credited with laying the foundations for the NHS;

Karen Jillings squeezes out the matter from *De Peste Edinburgi* in [\*\*Hercules Rollock and the Edinburgh Plague of 1585\*\*](#); and David Purdie gets to the heart of Robert Burns's medical satire in [\*\*Dr Hornbook—and Death\*\*](#). Meanwhile, Gavin Miller measures out the dosages for a double-blind trial in [\*\*Sick of Scottish Literature?\*\*](#); Rhona Brown sniffs at the Romantic vapours in [\*\*Memorialising the Death and Legacy of Robert Fergusson\*\*](#); Megan Coyer checks the sugar levels of [\*\*The Medical Kailyard\*\*](#); and we'll have the scans back of Vikki McCraw's [\*\*Medicine in Edinburgh: A Photographic Essay\*\*](#).

The treatment continues with J. P. O'Malley's [\*\*Interview with Jackie Kay\*\*](#), and we can feel [\*\*Bringing Irish and Scottish Studies Together\*\*](#), the first stirrings of the Scottish and Irish Studies Center at the University of Pittsburgh. Running the risk of an overdose, we also prescribe Maggie Scott for [\*\*Croup\*\*](#), and Alison Grant will see you right for [\*\*Gaelic Place-names: Occupational Terms\*\*](#).

Shake before opening. Dizziness may occur. Do not operate heavy machinery while taking *The Bottle Imp*. If swallowed, seek medical advice.

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