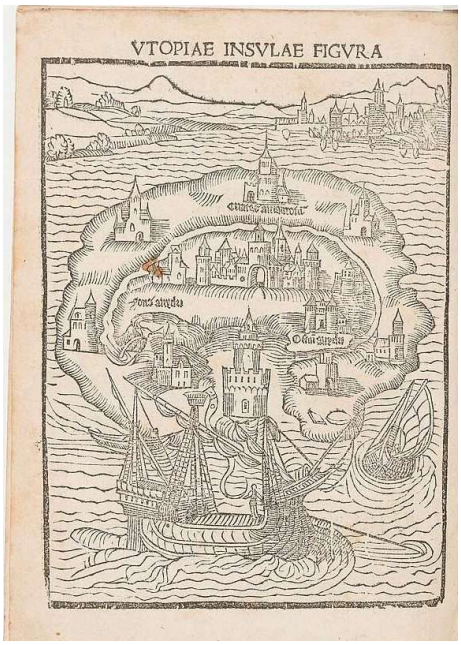
Halfway to Paradise

By The Unreliable Narrator



The woodcut for Utopia's map as it appears in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516)
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When Thomas More sketched out his vision in the sixteenth century of a sun-struck island idyll bobbing away merrily in the Atlantic swell, he ignited a centuries-long quest in dreamers and seekers across the world: the search for Utopia. Some took the sun as their guide, heading south in their pursuit of perfection; others, seduced by wild Romantic mists, followed the whale road north and landed on Scotland's shores, waiting for paradise to emerge from the haar.

Of course, pursuing an illusion can be a thankless task – think of Edwin Muir, whose memories of an idyllic island childhood left him with one foot in Eden, an Orcadian Arcadia in sight but just out of reach. And for those trying to assemble it from scratch – well, Scotland is no glimmering mirage, the rain makes sure of that. Building a utopia on slate and granite requires tough grit and hard graft. Even when you *think* you've done it, one slight shift in the wind and down it all falls, cradle and all – and that's if you manage to get your plans for wonderland off the ground in the first place.

In one particularly disastrous recent attempt, a group of strangers were left for a year on an estate in the western Highlands to build a self-sufficient community

away from modern life and all its tools and technology. Visions of a primitivist utopia – helpfully signposted with all the subtlety of a bulldozer by the title of the social experiment, *Eden* – soon descended into chaos. Fires blazed, the community ruptured into warring tribes, and one faction left dozens of deer carcasses to fester in the valley while debating whether to starve weaker members out of the group. 'I saw the darkness coming', one participant later said, the hell-scape of the Ardnamurchan peninsula flickering behind her haunted eyes.

The failure of the experiment – and many others like it – to account for humankind's many different shades proved the point that Scottish Enlightenment thinker David Hume had made centuries earlier when, citing Plato's *Republic* and More's *Utopia*, he proclaimed that 'All plans of government, which suppose great reformation in the manners of mankind, are plainly imaginary'. In other words, fictional utopias cannot exist in the real world without a total upheaval of human nature – the smoothing over of all our failures, society built on a blank slate devoid of conflict and complexity. Without boundlessly malleable inhabitants, Eden will fall, paradise will be lost, and back to reality we'll go with a thump and a groan.

Luckily for us, fictional worlds are no stranger to *The Bottle Imp* – and if a better life is out there somewhere, who's to say we shouldn't try to find it? In this new issue, we unroll Scotland's literary map and set off in search of Utopia.

Guiding us on our journey is Joseph S. Norman, who shoots into interstellar space to revisit the radical worlds of one of Scotland's best-loved science-fiction writers in 'Better to Create Your Own': On the Legacy and Utopianism of Iain M. Banks's Culture Series. Back on earth, Craig Lamont traverses Arcadia in the Lowlands in 'Class'd with Tasso and Guarini': Allan Ramsay's The Gentle Shepherd, and Greg Thomas takes a wander through the city to explore expressions of urban utopianism in 'I am Iron Bard': Edwin Morgan, Concrete Poetry and the Glasgow High Rises. Nicole Pohl looks back to the eighteenth century to examine visions of social and educational reform in Lunarians and Reformers: Mary Hamilton's Utopian Writings, while Kevin MacNeil casts an eye over the present to probe the problems of removing a place from reality in The Islands Are Not Lost, The Compass Is. Upon Another Point, Thomas Fox Averill takes us on a Burnsian pilgrimage in Myth and history: A story of 'Ae Fond Kiss' and other family mysteries, and, if you're in search of more worlds to escape to, we have a fresh

stack of book reviews, too.

All is for the best in this best of all possible issues!

The woodcut for Utopia's map as it appears in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) [Wikimedia Commons]

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