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The Bottle Imp

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Beam Me Up, Sir Walter!

This issue *The Bottle Imp* seeks out strange new worlds and scans new event horizons as we boldly go in search of Scotland's speculative fictions. Who knows what we will find? It's a big universe, after all.

Right in the middle of the Scottish Enlightenment, when Scotland's thinkers were writing down the rational rules of civilisation, Macpherson jumped out from the afterglow of the '45 with his *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, and laid the foundation stone of Romanticism – appropriately enough, on a shifting bed of crumbly invention. Writers of certain other nations – no names, no pack drill – might huff and pout, but Scotland took this in her stride, and didn't flip her wig. Scotland's always been good at dichotomies: Highland and Lowland, Scots and Gaelic, Enlightenment and Romantic.

Science fiction is the mongrel offspring of Romantic spirit and Enlightenment ideals, and bristles with a hybrid vigour – serious escapism, myth and reason, hand in hand. And one Scottish writer in particular can claim consideration as a founding father of the genre: Sir Walter Scott.

Of course, as the 19th century's dominant writer – bar none – Scott's influence pervades all modern literature. By defining what a novel (more importantly, what a *commercially successful* novel) felt, looked and sounded like, every author since, whether they know it or not, has either been following in Scott's footsteps, or desperately trying to hack themselves free from his tailcoats. And science fiction is a commercial literature, first and foremost, born out of the harsh pay-per-word school of the 20th century pulps. It's in the genre's DNA. No matter that weird and often beautiful new subspecies have evolved: it still carries that original imperative down there among its tailbones, and is none the worse for it.

Science fiction has Scottish literature in its bloodstream. And why not? Both have been sneered at, called childish, relegated to the fringes; both are vastly more skilful and creative than the self-appointed mainstream often cares to realise. Both have rebel, independent gleams in their eyes; and both have chips – silicon and potato – on their shoulders, too. Caroline McCracken-Flesher's article, **Scotland as Science Fiction**, probes these and other frontiers.

Scott's novels (and even his poems) are often filled with tales of marvels: wonders which Scott pumps for all their dramatic worth – then undercuts with rational explanations. Scott's marvels, true enough, tend to be supernatural: but any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. Even Abbotsford House, Scott's Romantic fantasy made real, conforms to type: among the heraldry and suits of armour lurk icons of early 19th-century ultra-modernity: gas-lights, pneumatic bells and an underfloor heating system.

Such internal contradictions are, of course, a common feature of Scottish literature in general. Think of Scotland's first great science fiction story, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, or the divided narratives of *Lanark*. One Scottish writer who sparks back and forth across the science fiction-mainstream gap is of course Iain (M.) Banks – a man whose middle initial can determine on what shelf, section, or even floor his book might be found (his latest paperback, *Transitions*, reviewed in this issue, is authored by Iain Banks in the UK and Iain M. Banks in the USA). These deliberate confusions are opened up to view in Martyn Colebrook's article **Reading Double, Writing Double**.

Less well known today that Banks, but no less an explorer of alternative realities, is David Lindsay, author of *Voyage to Arcturus*. Stuart Kelly analyses Lindsay's unique, disturbing visions in **Many Worlds**. The strange, dreamlike fantasy *Lilith*, by George MacDonald, is examined by David Melville in **Beautiful Terrors**.

Discussing Scotland as a site of science fiction, Ken MacLeod makes no apologies for the catastrophes he has brought down upon us, from tactical nukes to runaway AIs – reminding us that **The Future Will Happen Here Too**.

Perhaps the greatest and most singular contribution to the genre to come from Scotland has been the science fiction poetry of Edwin Morgan. Poetry and science fiction might seem like strangers: so what could be more science-fictional than to write science fiction in poetic form, from one of the foremost poets of the contemporary era? Hamish Whyte voyages out into **The Milk of Space**.

All this and our regular columns too. Don't worry: the engines can take it.

The Unreliable Narrator



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