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# The Bottle Imp

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**Scottish Studies profile:**  
**Dr Gavin Miller**

**A**s a teenager in Scotland in the 1980s, I didn't know there were supposedly two cultures, the arts and the sciences. There were certainly different subjects at school, but it was possible to excel in English or French, and also in Physics or Maths. There were a lot of "good all-rounders" at my high school, a fairly representative state secondary school in Kirkcaldy, Fife. The Scottish educational system undoubtedly was important in this regard. The academically able could take five Higher subjects, and three Sixth Year courses, and it was perfectly proper to mix humanities and sciences.

I read a lot as a teenager. Much of the fiction was of doubtful quality (I don't think Shaun Hutson's 1982 horror novel, *Slugs*, will ever be canonized by anyone, anywhere, let alone by Harold Bloom). But I also read Scottish fiction, such as Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* and 1982 *Janine* – these had been handed to my brother for Sixth Year study, and then down to me. The local public library in Burntisland had a good science fiction collection. Many of the books were in the yellow-jacketed Gollancz editions, and I found work by Kurt Vonnegut, Robert Heinlein, and Arthur C. Clarke.

When the time came to go on to higher education, I refused an offered place in Astrophysics, and, after some procrastination, leapt without looking into an MA General at Edinburgh University, which eventually turned into an Honours Degree in English Literature.

My culture shock was, for a time, dispiriting: arts and sciences were generally quite distinct, and there was little encouragement to peek over disciplinary fences. Despite this, I felt that in English Literature there were rays of hope. There were staff, many of them Scottish, who – it was darkly rumoured – had gone from sciences to humanities in the progression from high school to university, or had changed degree between faculties. (I won't expose this fifth column in a public forum such as *The Bot-*

*tle Imp*, but they and I know who they are.) I also had enormous freedom to read what I wanted beyond the set literary and theoretical material. This was particularly true in Scottish Literature. The sheer lack of critical material at the time (since rectified) meant that I could spend less time genuflecting to previous critics, and instead just work up an essay based on a) the course I was nominally on, and b) whatever sociologist, philosopher, or other thinker I had found that week in Jürgen Habermas's footnotes.

I found a similar intellectual freedom while I wrote my PhD on the fiction of George Friel and Alasdair Gray under the supervision of Cairns Craig. This freedom continued into my immediate postdoctoral career, in which I wrote and published on the intersection between Scottish literature and Scottish psychoanalysis. An opportunity came up to write about Scottish science fiction when Berthold Schoene (who would later become my colleague at MMU in Manchester) devised his compendious *Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature* (2007). I grabbed the chance to write about Iain (M.) Banks, and the ideology of artificial intelligence and so-called "posthumanism" that inspires his work. The floodgates had been opened: more followed on Banks, on Naomi Mitchison, on Ken MacLeod, and on Scottish science fiction in general. The seed sown by those Gollancz yellow covers was finally beginning to grow ... and in my native soil.

The great thing about writing on Scottish science fiction is that the texts can readily be seen as both part of a national tradition and as part of an international genre. Science fiction writing by Scots, or set in Scotland, may relate meaningfully to other Scottish texts. Ken MacLeod's science fiction often deals with a static, atemporal society which is suddenly jolted into rapid progress. It's hard not to see this as a response to a Scottish canon in which (as Cairns Craig has argued) Scotland has typically been represented as a place "out of history".

On the other hand, Scottish science fiction may relate more to its genre than its national location. Naomi Mitchison's *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962) certainly has some particularly Scottish elements, but the more conspicuous categories in the text are embodiment and gender. *Memoirs* returns again and again to the question of the animal inheritance in human being, and in particular the psychology of so-called "attachment" between mother and child.

All this freedom is refreshing. Scottish literary scholars will know a problem that has beset

their field: many Scottish texts are somehow seen only as Scottish, no matter what their genre, philosophy, form, antecedents, or other defining characteristics. There are exceptions (Scott, Stevenson, Spark, most obviously), but many of us know that sinking feeling when we understand, for instance, that Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Sunset Song* (1932) doesn't really get to be part of British modernism, even though it's a modernist novel written and published in Britain. The same goes for genres such as Kailyard (not Victorian literature ... not even literature), or texts such as George Douglas Brown's 1901 novel *The House with the Green Shutters* (a naturalist novel, but rarely mentioned in the same breath as Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900)). Things are getting better – thanks in part to the good work of the ASLS in promoting Scottish Literature internationally, and to book series like Rodopi's SCROLL – but there is still some way to go. Thankfully, Scottish science fiction gets to be *both* Scottish *and* science fiction.

The exact shape of things to come in Scottish literary studies is unclear. But there are promising signs, and the study of Scottish science fiction is one of them.

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