



ISSN 1754-1514

# The Bottle Imp

**Issue 18, June 2015**

**As if You Lived in the Near Future of an Undecided Nation**

**Ken MacLeod**

In July 2014 I was interviewed by Barbara Melville on behalf of the Scottish Writers' Centre at the Scottish Storytelling Centre on the theme of Imagining Future Scotlands. Preparing for the event, I realised that I'd probably written about a greater number of different future Scotlands than almost anyone else. About half my novels and several of my shorter works are set wholly or partly in Scotland, and of the others all but one have characters whose lives and adventures began in Scotland. As I indicated in an earlier article in *The Bottle Imp*,<sup>1</sup> I've done many awful things to Lochcarron.

A lot of science fiction has been written from Scotland, but very little science fiction has been set in Scotland. Much of that little, curiously enough, consists of novels in which cops, spooks, and spies play a big part. In crime novels or thrillers, whether set in the future or not, the Caledonian Antisyzigy becomes literal in double lives.

Some science fiction, in Scotland as elsewhere, is written outside the genre. Michel Faber's *Under the Skin* features an alien infiltrator with nefarious intent, in the form of a woman cruising the A9 for hitchhikers. Christopher Brookmyre has been writing an alternate or secret history of contemporary Scotland, in the guise of blackly comic crime novels, for the past twenty years.

Even non-genre literature seems drawn to the trope. The great contemporary realist mainstream literary novel of Scotland's recent past, James Robertson's *And the Land Lay Still* (2010), involves the double life of a spy in the nationalist movement, the ambiguous and conflicting evidence in the case of the death

(accident, suicide, or murder?) of Willie MacRae, and the hidden life of a Tory MP ashamed of a sexual fetish. It's as if we're all justified sinners, treading in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, with *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* hot on our heels.

As part of my research for the interview last July I re-read *Scotch on the Rocks* (1971), by Douglas Hurd and Andrew Osmond. Set later in the decade in which it was published, this thriller envisages a growing Scottish nationalist movement expressed in votes for the SNP, in angry marches and rallies on the streets, and (clandestinely at first) in arms. With Northern Ireland then ablaze, the idea of a Scottish nationalist uprising was guaranteed to grab readers. And the possibility wasn't quite as far-fetched as it may now seem, or even as it seemed at the time.

A 'Scottish Liberation Army' led by an eccentric former Army officer already had a few years of shadowy recruitment, military training and publicity stunts behind it.<sup>2</sup> The year after the book's publication saw Scotland's first 'tartan terrorist' bombing, which failed to bring down an electricity pylon. Similar low-key (and fortunately bloodless) *attentats* peppered the decade. Far from threatening the British state, Scotland's handful of clueless emulators of the IRA found themselves speedily rolled up by the security services and given stiff jail sentences.

*Scotch on the Rocks* takes very much a patrician Tory view of the world: social problems and conflicts are acknowledged, but behind the scenes of any radical effort to tackle them the hand of Moscow is likely to be at work. Several of the characters, on either side, are leading double lives. Some elements of the plot are risible: if I wanted to take over Scotland in a well-planned armed insurrection, I wouldn't start by seizing control of Fort William. But the genuineness of the national question, and the depth of Scotland's social divisions, get fair play: there are speeches and expositions that, with a little editing to update the problems (foodbanks and poverty rather than unemployment, Trident rather than Polaris) could have gone down well from the Yes campaign's platforms. For all its corniness and the posh-girl sex and tough-guy violence of its time, *Scotch on the Rocks* retains its resonance today, when the future it imagined has been shunted from 'near-future' to another SF sub-genre: alternate history.

The many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics places the alternate histories and parallel worlds of science fiction firmly

in fundamental physics, albeit frustratingly and forever out of reach. The interpretation's rediscovery by a student in a post-nuclear-holocaust Scotland is a thrilling moment in Graham Dunstan Martin's *Time-Slip* (1986). Will the young heretic use it to challenge the gloomy dominance of the Kirk? Indeed he does, but – this is Scotland! His ideas are seized on as the basis of an alternate religion, in which the assumed reality of happier outcomes in other worlds reconciles folk all the more to the grim realities of their own, to the point where a drowning child's cries meet nothing but fatalistic passivity.

Any story set in a near-future Scotland (or indeed Britain) now faces the distinct possibility of having its version of the future become alternate history before it's published. After writing *Halting State* and *Rule 34*, two police procedurals with just such a setting, my friend and fellow SF writer Charles Stross had to rein back any plans for a third. He coined the phrase 'the Scottish political singularity' to pinpoint that binary uncertainty which makes imagining the country's future a particular challenge. As he wrote in May 2014:

[T]here's a point where politics impinges directly on the circumstances of my writing, and that's when it goes nonlinear, and by nonlinear I mean "depending on the outcome of three upcoming elections, I may be living in one of three different countries in two years' time." (Two of which would be called "The United Kingdom" but would be very different from one another, and one of which would be called "The Kingdom of Scotland".) It makes it *really hard* to even think about writing that next near-future Scottish police thriller when I can't predict what country it will be set in, much less what its public culture will look like or where it will be ruled from.<sup>3</sup>

My own first four novels, written in the 1990s, are set in divergent futures, but share a past in which the United Kingdom has become the United Republic: a federation of English, Scottish and Welsh states, each with their own flag under the republic's tricolour. One character remembers reciting every morning in school: 'I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United Republic, and to the States for which it stands: three nations, individual, with liberty and justice for all.' Which makes the constitutional settlement of these novels' coming British Revolution unambiguous enough. The crucial election in which a radical government comes to power and sets about modernising

the creaking British constitution is in 2014, which back in 1995 seemed a safely distant future. Oops.

I wrote *The Execution Channel* (2007) in a year when the near future of the entire world, and not just of Scotland, seemed uncertain. Its central character is a patriotic Englishman, but because the poor chap's in a Scottish novel he's leading a double life as a spy for France. The story is set late in the present decade, and for plot reasons the history of the intervening years had to be at least outlined. But any morning, I felt, I could wake up and find that the future had been changed by some world-shaking act that would make the novel alternate history overnight – as did indeed happen to William Gibson, well into the writing of a near-future novel in September 2001.

*The Execution Channel* is fuelled by anger (on the part of the author as much as the characters) at this state of affairs, but the very problem it was written about made writing it difficult. I grumbled about this to a friend, the critic Farah Mendlesohn, and she came up with the brilliant suggestion of making it overtly alternate history from the start, by changing some key event that was already in the past. So Al Gore wins the US Presidency in 2000 (for reasons I had great fun having a character explain), 9/11 is inflicted on Boston rather than NYC, and everything else including the Iraq invasion and the War on Terror unfolds exactly as it did in our world, except with different 9/11 conspiracy theories.

In my more recent works set in the near future – *The Night Sessions* (2008), *Intrusion* (2012), and *Descent* (2014) – the Scottish Government clearly has a great deal of autonomy, but it's never made entirely clear whether or not it's formally independent. Shading such an apparently fundamental issue in the depiction of a future Scotland is easier than it might seem. In everyday life, in everyday police work and (I imagine) in everyday intelligence work, the constitutional standing of the state we happen to be in is taken for granted, and can be plausibly left unspoken in a novel.

The ambivalence can even be played on. *The Night Sessions* has in its background an installation at Hendon called the Police National Artificial Intelligence, the PNAI (nicknamed, of course, Paranoia). When Lothian and Borders Police (oops, again – but who could have foreseen that?) use it in a high-profile case, they come in for some ribbing from down south: 'The *Telegraph* ran a smug think-piece about

how Scotland still relied on national police resources.' But is this because Scotland already has, or because some Scots still demand, independence? The question is left open.

This deliberate ambiguity was more than a canny hedging of bets (though it was that). At the time I wrote these novels, I was influenced by my regular Sunday reading of the talented columnist Iain MacWhirter, who back then was keen to emphasise how indistinguishable in practice 'Devo Max' and 'Indy Lite' might turn out to be.

As the referendum crept closer last year, however, the alternatives became suddenly more stark. The consequences of the referendum were so momentous, for the future not only of Scotland but of the UK, that they could quite conceivably affect the entire future history of the world. That a geopolitical tremor, at the very least, would accompany the disappearance of the United Kingdom as it had hitherto existed was well understood by world leaders, almost all of whom looked on with trepidation. To put it in science-fictional terms, two distinct timelines diverged from September 18 2014.

As the approach to the decision point became a matter of hours rather than days, I found myself gripped by Charlie's metaphor of 'Schrodinger's Kingdom'. After the polls closed and before the count was complete I thought of the ballot boxes as containing two possible futures. The country existed for a few hours of that long and foggy night in an indeterminate state, like the cat in the eponymous thought experiment. A No voter myself, I woke to learn that the uncertainty and indeterminacy of the future had been raised to a new level: 'Opened the box. The cat is alive and having kittens.'

A Scotland of quantum indeterminacy, in which all possibilities exist somewhere, is hinted at in Andrew Crumey's *Sputnik Caledonia* (2008). This long and moving novel of a lost but doubled life, alternate history, secret installations and secret police is only superficially science fiction.<sup>4</sup> It uses the idea of parallel worlds and alternate histories as a metaphor for an abiding truth: every choice, good or bad, is a loss of an entire possible world.

Now that Scotland's actual future has begun to be grasped as a matter of individual and collective choice, the metaphor of many worlds and multiple time-lines may yet prove more fertile, and more prevalent in literature, than that of divided minds, double lives and dop-pelgangers: an intriguing possibility that (as far as I'm concerned) is long overdue to be realised.

**Ken MacLeod** is one of Scotland's leading authors of science fiction, whose titles include *The Star Fraction* (1995), *Newton's Wake* (2004), *The Execution Channel* (2007), and *The Restoration Game* (2010). *Descent* (2014) is his latest book.

## Notes

- 1 "The Future Will Happen Here Too", *The Bottle Imp* 8, November 2010 <http://asls.arts.gla.ac.uk/SWE/TBI/TBIIssue8/MacLeod.html>
- 2 According to David Leslie, former Scottish Crime Editor of the *News of the World*, in *Inside a Terrorist Group – the Story of the SNLA* (unpublished but available online: <http://www.electricscotland.com/books/snla.htm>), Douglas Hurd was sent to Scotland by Ted Heath to investigate the political situation and the influence of the SLA. Leslie suggests that some of the characters in the novel are based on members of the SLA and the wider nationalist movement.
- 3 <http://www.antipope.org/charlie/blog-static/2014/06/the-scottish-political-singula.html>
- 4 My reasons for not reading *Sputnik Caledonia* as SF can be found here: <http://kenmacleod.blogspot.co.uk/2010/11/sputnik-caledonia-or-parallel-worlds-of.html>.



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