

Plugging in: How the new politics are powered by a buzzing culture

Artists have solidified our sense of identity and national self-worth

A SCENE from a surgery in Partick: I am exchanging pleasantries with a cheery and tender medic, who is attending to my klutzy leg for the weekend, nurse?

“Oh, I’m off to the Citizens to see the Lanark play. The reviews so far have been wonderful. I’m a deep reader of all Alasdair Gray’s work.” A Yes voter? Need you ask?

The question of how we think of Scottish culture one year after the

indyref, and as we stumble and search our way towards the next one, is messy and nuanced. At least in the Yes-zones, however, it’s hard to avoid the natural, everyday relationship between culture and politics that has evolved.

Let’s be clear though: Scottish culture doesn’t march to a politician’s schedule. Indeed, it tends to anticipate political options, operating like a kind of advanced warning system. The writer and playwright Peter Arnott has noted all the major “referendum” plays were already written in the 80s and 90s – *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black Black Oil*, *John Brown’s Body*, *Border Warfare*, and *Caledonia Dreaming*.

Scottish literature declared its own act of radical autonomy, at the level of writing style in the 70s and 80s with authors such as Gray, Tom Leonard, James Kelman, Janice Galloway, Liz Lochhead and many others. They had an intense commitment to the particulars of the Scottish “voice” – in terms of language, vocabulary, and social experiences previously unrepresented.

But they also consciously placed themselves in universal contexts – of feminism, socialism and anarchism, or as contributors to a post-imperialist “world literature”.

From their writing desks and favourite howffs, these writers declared their independence on the planet, never mind “in Europe”.

The wave of writers immediately after them – Alan Warner, Alison



Kennedy, Liz Smith, James Roberston, Iain Banks and Irvine Welsh (again, among many others) – adapted their predecessors’ radicalism. They took their worldly, intimate, complex Scottishness, and brought it to invigorate other mediums and markets.

The overall result of this activity, as it impacted on the indyref, was to provide a rich cultural background – by no means homogenous or propagandist – which supported a mentality of essential national self-worth amongst the citizens. (Never did the two bumptious Georges – Galloway and Robertson – make more of a fool of themselves in the campaign than when they suggested Scotland didn’t have a “distinctive culture”.)

We should never forget that the referendum vote, despite the crude binary of the question, ended up being about “full powers” versus “more powers” for a self-governing Scotland. No version of us as a “North Britain” was, or even could be, implied.

For this, we have to thank the “voicing” of Scotland by its artists, to some degree at least, as they helped solidify and articulate that modern identity.

In response to the indyref and its surging aftermath, there seem to be some subtle shifts under way, at the highest cultural levels. After Jonathan Mills’ ill-considered proclamations of constitutional “neutrality” at the 2014 Edinburgh International Festival, the new director Fergus Linehan seems to have been much more relaxed about placing major Scots works alongside a global programme.

Take the satirical version of James Hogg’s *Confessions*, as well as the children’s production *Dragon*, and

Pat Kane



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The cultural big ticket this year has been the Citizens' production of Alastair Gray's dystopian vision, *Lanark*, which played to sold-out houses at Edinburgh Festival



Otters were declared extinct in Japan in 2012

Skye helps in Japanese attempt to reintroduce extinct otters

BY GEORGINA REID

SKYE is to welcome a delegation of Japanese conservationists desperate to see otters in the wild for the first time and save their cultural folklore.

Otters were declared extinct in Japan by its ministry of the environment in August 2012 but they play an important role in Japanese culture.

Folk stories describe otters as creatures which can shape-shift into humans, including beautiful women and monks, who fool people and sometimes kill them.

The International Otter Survival Fund (IOSF), based on Skye, has been working with Japan's conservation expert Dr Takahiro Murakami and his team on a project to reintroduce the creatures to Japan.

Dr Murakami, who has never seen otters in the wild before, will arrive as part of a three-strong delegation next weekend.

Grace Yoxon, IOSF director, said the team want to observe the signs of otters and hopefully see otters in their natural habitat.

She said: "Otters are a really important part of Japan's culture. There are a lot of folk stories about otters so they want to reintroduce them before people lose familiarity with them."

"Dr Murakami invited us over to Japan last October for a workshop to talk about how to reintroduce them and the relationship has built from there."

"Now they are coming here for three days and hopefully be able to see otters living in the wild for the first time."

"We have around 350 otters on Skye so hopefully they won't all be hiding."

The Japanese otter was either a subspecies of the Eurasian otter or possibly a separate species. As they no longer exist, it is hoped otters from the neighbouring Russian island of Sakhalin will be introduced to the Hokkaido island in north Japan.

Yoxon added: "We visited the Shiretoko National Park and the surroundings were very similar to Scotland, there were just no otters."

of course David Greig's and Graham Eatough's version of *Lanark*. The EIF's Hub venue also prominently features King Creosote's heart-melting combination of music and footage, *From Scotland With Love*, as well as Scots multi-instrumentalist Alexi Murdoch.

IF this heralds a shift towards a more reciprocal relationship between the cosmopolitan and the Scottish-national, in cultural programming in this country – to the mutual enrichment of both – it is to be quietly but clearly welcomed.

However, as Greig wisely counselled in August 2014, if someone asked him to write a play "about" the referendum he wouldn't know where to start. "It's just not how a play arrives," he said. "A play begins, for me, with an unsettled feeling, a sense of matters unresolved. It can take years and years for that grain of psychic sand to acquire enough layers of grit to become the pearl of a play."

And for play read any artwork: Greig predicts that in five years' time, the

Fringe will be louping with referendum backstories. But given that "fiction sometimes functions as a kind of receiver of distant signals from the future", as the playwright puts it, we should remember to read and view Scots culture with as open a mind as possible.

Posters in the streets can be useful clues. Alongside the bills for rockers and ravers, the Glasgow theatre company Cryptic's engagement with Indonesian culture this month, timed for the country's 70th independence anniversary, has fascinated me.

Is this a geo-aesthetic preparing for the geo-politics of independence? Scots need a full understanding of a 21st-century world where centres of power are multiple. But perhaps opening up the channels of art and culture, in all their ambiguity, personal connection and emotional openness, may be more important and enduring than any commercial or political exchange between nations.

The young design crew Lateral North also speak to this, in their various graphic mappings and connections across the North Sea and up to the Arctic. They have pulled this together in an "atlas of productivity" – where Scotland is already a pulsing power-centre of natural and cultural resources.

It also await the fusion between the more traditional art forms in Scottish culture, and our thriving techno-culture – of apps, computer games and graphics, new social platforms, electronic dance music.

I kicked off this column earlier this year with a protest against the closure of the Arches in Glasgow – not a great indicator of progress in this area. But as we know all too well in Scotland, something falling

over spectacularly can often allow gnarly little hybrids to thrive amidst the rubble. The future of Scotland, like the future of other nations, involves grappling with new technologies and possibilities. It's appropriate our current cultural big-ticket is in part an SF dystopia, ending with a giant fiery and watery storm swamping a totalitarian Glasgow.

But let's also remember Alasdair Gray's other hero, Bella Baxter from *Poor Things*. Bella is revived from death by a Frankenstein-like doctor and given the brain of a child, which makes her innocent, energetic and insatiably curious.

If I could haul one genre into the beating heart of Scottish culture, it would be speculative/science fiction. More startling alternatives, fewer tedious backstreet mur-durrs, please.

The cover of yesterday's souvenir edition of this paper reminds us of one standard role of culture and creativity, as we prepare for the next collective leap. There was more than enough artistic agit-prop and icon-making in the last indyref to go around. And I'm sure it will crank up again for any second referendum.

But in an age of mass self-expression, the aesthetes and taste-police should relax a little about the popular culture of Yes. The only energy shortage we should really worry about in a politics of independence is a human energy shortage.

Our cultural life – from the quickest cheap-shot collage on social media, to the ambivalent masterwork summoned slowly from the maker's depths – will continue to be one of the obvious places for the indy movement to plug in. And charge up.

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