SCENE from a surgery in Partick: I am exchanging pleasantries with a cheery and tender medic, who is attending to my klutzy leg wound. So what’s your schedule like 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
**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 Taka-hiro 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.”

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