

# **The Secret History of Northern Irish Science Fiction**

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**From a talk given at CCA Derry-Londonderry on 19<sup>th</sup> of May, 2016 as part of the public programme for the exhibition *Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone*.**

The origin of the title of this talk goes back to when I was studying English and Irish literature as an undergrad, enjoying the works of Bob Shaw, James White and Ian McDonald, seeking mentions of their work in literary journals and not finding much. I decided that I would make this my area of study, directing the lens of Irish Studies towards the analysis of what Irish science fiction there was. The more I researched the material, the more I realised that this material is probably only a secret to academics, that fans are busy enjoying them and discussing these texts and that Ian McDonald is a writer who is regularly nominated for awards and options his fiction for television and film. However, I think it is important to try to appraise this phenomenon of Northern Irish science fiction through an academic lens, because whereas the study of Irish modernity has experienced a boom in recent times, mention of what Irish science fiction there is has been scant. Of course, this is notwithstanding Jack Fennell's *Irish Science Fiction* from 2014, which I think of as the beginning of the conversation rather than its full stop (Fennell, 2014). I think that the subject needs more than just one book, and I think that innovations like this exhibition provide a great opportunity to bring this material to the forefront and encourage people to seek it out themselves.

This discussion is something like an appendix to the exhibition. It will sketch out an incomplete history of science fiction in Northern Ireland, concentrating in particular on Belfast. As the centre for industrialisation and capitalist modernity in Ireland in a key period, it makes sense that Belfast is the place where science fiction would take root most firmly. The postcolonial science fiction critic John Rieder notes that capitalist modernity is a prerequisite for the emergence of science fiction (Rieder, 2008). As Fredric Jameson suggests, the concept of modernity itself is a means by

which cultures chronologise themselves, positing themselves as the forefront of history while other cultures are perceived as being caught in a time lag and the science fiction imaginary is a key element in this process. The talk will span quite a bit of time (over a hundred years). Using the *Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone* exhibition as a point of departure, this paper will attempt to sketch a partial history of a science fiction tradition in Northern Ireland by way of an introduction to the topic, and point out some features of interest within the texts themselves and their relevance to Irish Studies.

The story begins in the late nineteenth century with Robert Cromie, the Belfast author and journalist whose 1890 novel *A Plunge Into Space* details a journey by a team of seven men to Mars by means of a steel globe that utilises anti-gravity technology. On Mars, the group find a utopian society with no money or conflict. The Irish weather makes its presence felt on this fictional Mars through the intervention of ‘a powerful machine for electrically disturbing the atmosphere’, which ensures that ‘all the moisture in the air is precipitated during the hours of the night.’

Cromie called the kind of fiction he was writing ‘histories of the future’, and the work bears the obvious influence of the French science fiction writer Jules Verne. The second edition of *A Plunge Into Space* contains an introduction purportedly written by Verne introducing Cromie as his ‘skilful and bold...pupil’ and praises the ‘weird and wild’ voyage that the book describes. However, there is some debate as to whether the introduction is authentic or a fraud perpetrated by Cromie or his publisher. The topic was the subject of two letters to the academic journal *Science Fiction Studies* in 1993. Robert M. Philmus pointed out that Cromie often asserted that HG Wells had stolen the idea for a spherical anti-gravity device for his *First Men in the Moon* novel from *A Plunge Into Space*. Given that in Verne’s criticism of Wells’s work elsewhere, it is the spherical anti-gravity device that Verne finds so unrealistic about Wells’s novel, Philmus doubts that Verne would provide such a glowing introduction to a text depicting a similar device (Philmus, 1993). In the same edition of *Science Fiction Studies*, Arthur B. Evans speculates that Jules Verne’s son may have perpetrated the fraud, Michael Verne having written and published two science fiction stories

under his father's name in the same period in which Cromie's novel appeared (Evans, 1993).

What is not in doubt is that Cromie's second science fiction novel, 1895's *The Crack of Doom* contains the first fictional description of an atomic explosion. In the novel the device is designed by the mad scientist (as well as socialist and feminist), Herbert Brande to destroy a world that he considers beyond redemption. Brande declares that 'one grain of matter contains sufficient energy...to raise a hundred thousand tons nearly two miles.' In typical supervillain fashion, Brande declares that 'the agent I will employ has cost me all life to discover. It will release the vast stores of etheric energy locked up in the huge atomic warehouse of this planet...this earth, at least, and, I am encouraged to hope, the whole solar system, will by my instrumentality be restored to the ether from which it never should have emerged.' However, through the intervention of the hero Arthur Marcel the destruction wrought by the device is reduced to the destruction of a small island in the South Pacific (Cromie, 2009). Cromie lived in Belfast for his entire life, and the influence of the city is apparent in his science fiction. As Jack Fennell notes, Cromie identified strongly with the British Empire and with the engineering culture of Belfast industry, not least in *A Plunge Into Space's* descriptions of the 'terrible furnaces' that produce the steel globe in an Alaskan foundry (Fennell, 2014).

C.S. Lewis was also, like Cromie, born in Belfast, although in his *Out of the Silent Planet* novel in 1938 and the two subsequent entries in his Space Trilogy in 1943 and 1945 there is little trace of his roots in the region. Whereas Cromie's admiration for engineering leads him to explain how his fictional inventions work in pseudo-scientific terms, Fennell notes that Lewis avoids the issue by having the evil scientist in *Out of the Silent Planet* state that only four or five physicists in the world would understand how travel to other planets is achieved. To locate a substantial link between Lewis and the place of his birth you will have to allow me to cross over the border of genre into Lewis's fantasy works based in the fictional land of Narnia. In 2008, the connection between Narnia and Northern Ireland was widely reported when the film release of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* suggested the tantalising possibility of the emergence of a New Zealand/*Lord of the Rings*-style tourist industry in the

region. Lewis left Northern Ireland for England when he was ten years old and from this vantage point viewed its landscape through a fantastical lens. Lewis once wrote to his brother that 'that part of Rostrevor which overlooks Carlingford Lough is my idea of Narnia' (Campbell, 2005). However, the connection between C.S. Lewis and Northern Irish science fiction goes slightly deeper. Ian McDonald, the author whose work is the point of departure for his exhibition, once lived in a house built in the garden of Lewis's childhood home, 'Little Lea' in Strandtown, East Belfast.

We will continue the history of Northern Irish science fiction in the post-war period in a moment. However, neglecting island-wide instances of science fiction that sprang up in the period and after would be a mistake. Tom Greer combines flying men and the Home Rule crisis in *A Modern Daedalus* (1885), and Joseph O'Neill depicts telepathic Roman despots in *Land Under England* (1935). As well as these examples, science fiction texts appear sporadically across the island and often involve literary writers experimenting with the genre rather than engaging continuously with the form. Of the novels that Fennell discusses, Michael McCormack's *Notes from a Coma* (2005), and Kevin Barry's *City of Bohane* (2011) are great examples of this.

Nevertheless, Belfast is significant in that it has had a consistent high profile affinity with science fiction at least since the middle of the twentieth century, producing authors who identify as science fiction writers and who have substantial bodies of work. Belfast science fiction is synonymous with three names: Walt Willis, James White and Bob Shaw. In *THEN*, Rob Hansen's ongoing history of science fiction fandom, Hansen suggests an origin story for Irish science fiction fandom at end of World War II. A date between Walt Willis and the girl he had been seeing Madeleine Brian ended up with the two taking shelter in a newsagent. When both reached for the same magazine, a British reprint of the American science fiction publication *Astounding*, they both realised that the other was a science fiction reader and began to encourage each other in pursuing the interest (Hansen, 1989).

The editor of *Astounding* was John W. Campbell, a key figure in the establishment of a science fiction that aimed to base itself on sound scientific principles, or as it came

to be known 'hard science fiction'. Campbell was renowned for his prescriptive idea of what constituted science fiction, and his practice of pressing authors for revisions of their work, or even making revisions without their consultation. The historian of science fiction and author Adam Roberts suggests that under Campbell's tutelage, science fiction came to represent an 'Orderly, knowable universe and the place of the scientifically minded man within it.' One of Campbell's catchphrases at *Astounding* under his watch was 'the boys don't like mysticism', but this did not stop him from featuring telepathy and mind control heavily across the pages of the magazine (Roberts, 2005). Campbell also published the early examples of L. Ron Hubbard's dianetics in the March 1950 issue of *Astounding*. So make of Campbell's claims for scientific rigour what you will.

The second of the Belfast science fiction trio is James White, whose discovery of science fiction is also linked to World War II in that, as Patrick Maume notes, the science fiction magazines he was uncovering in the Smithfield Markets were sold to the markets by American soldiers stationed in Belfast in preparation for D-Day (Maume, 2008). White was born to a West Belfast Catholic family in 1928, and resided in the Andersonstown area of the city for most of his working life. Although Willis and White lived in the same city, Willis first contacted White through the letters page of the English magazine *Fantasy*. It was common practice for science fiction magazines to print the full address of correspondents, so when Willis noted a letter from another Belfast science fiction enthusiast in the magazine, he wrote to White and the two met in August 1947. Together with Madeleine, who was now Willis's wife, the three constituted Ireland's first science fiction fan group Irish Fandom, which held meetings at the Willis's house at Upper Newtownards Road. Willis and White quickly set about working on their own science fiction fanzine. Ironically, for a cultural pursuit predicated on speculation regarding technological advance, the resulting publication *Slant* was produced with relatively makeshift materials. Willis and White printed the zine on a hand-levered flatbed printing press that Willis claimed to have found and liberated from the backroom of a chemist shop where a friend worked. In addition, White provided woodcut illustrations with the aid of a razor and plywood.

*Slant* appeared in 1948 and introduced the Irish Fandom group to the global science fiction community, chiefly Walt Willis, James White and the later addition Bob Shaw, who joined the group and began contributing to *Slant* in 1950. Apart from fan activity, which mainly involved writing reports from science fiction conventions for zines, sharing science fiction collections, and engaging in veiled in-jokes with other science fiction fans, the members of Irish Fandom also branched out into writing science fiction themselves, pursuing the elusive achievement of becoming a full-time professional writer. Willis and Shaw paid homage to the low-tech means with which they produced their zines in 1954's *The Enchanted Duplicator*, a light-hearted adventure story that follows the journey of a science fiction fan to the Tower of Trufandom to claim the titular Duplicator, a magical version of their flatbed printing press. James White wrote stories prolifically throughout the 1950s, selling work to the UK magazines *New Worlds* and *Nebula*, as well as selling his story 'The Scavengers' to Campbell's *Astounding* in 1953.

White's work in the period also included a serialised story called 'Tourist Planet', which appeared in *New Worlds* in three instalments in 1956. White expanded into his first novel *The Secret Visitors* in 1957, a science fiction mystery in which the protagonist Dr. Lockhart unravels an interstellar conspiracy to use Earth as a tourist destination for extraterrestrials. The novel is located in Ireland and White peppers the text with Irish references such as Aer Lingus planes and a performance of 'Londonderry Air', the tune of which is inextricably linked to the song 'Danny Boy' (White, 1971).

Bob Shaw made his first fiction sale in 1954, placing his story 'Aspect' in *Nebula* magazine, a first contact narrative in which astronauts investigate alien architecture for clues as to the civilisation that constructed it. Shaw later dismissed his early work as 'juvenilia', and the author took a break from science fiction in 1956, the year he and his wife Sadie went to live in Alberta, Canada for two years. Shaw worked as a draughtsman by day and a taxi driver by night, in an attempt to save enough money to purchase a house on his return (Ian Shaw, 2011). Shaw, was born in Belfast in 1931, and trained as a draughtsman upon leaving school. Upon returning from

Canada in 1958, he went to work as an aeroplane designer for Short and Harland, eventually moving to a public relations position.

Having become a science fiction fan at age eleven, Shaw claimed that the genre provided a means to fulfil 'the pressing need to escape from the suburban Belfast in the late 1930s' (Stableford, 2007). Describing his discovery of the stories of the Canadian author A.E. Van Vogt at age eleven as something of an epiphany, in an interview with the British science fiction journal *Foundation*, Shaw compares the effect as 'more devastating than LSD and much longer lasting.' Shaw's mother did piece-work in a factory, while his father was a policeman and part-time gamekeeper, and the science fiction critic Brian Stableford describes a clash between Shaw's involvement with science fiction fandom and what he calls the 'dour culture of the Protestant work ethic in one of its narrower manifestations' (Stableford, 2007).

Given Shaw's technical and engineering background, it initially seems incongruous that the author would utilise such a technologically literate genre as a means by which to escape the discipline of a working life in Belfast's industrial sector. However, Shaw perceived science fiction as offering access to an actual contingent reality more real than the everyday concerns of industrial Belfast. Shaw saw the line of flight that science fiction provided as an escape *to* rather than from reality, believing that the genre called the values of his society into question, rendering them fantastical. In the *Foundation* article, Shaw declares that 'the world image presented by mundane 'realists' is one in which the invariants are things like mortgages, the TUC, engine wear, national insurance contributions, prostate troubles, Sunday, unemployment figures, newspapers, cemeteries, Harpic, ambition, season tickets, raincoats, Russia, suet, gas meters, greenfly, and so on. What the science fiction buff understands is that all these things are merely local phenomena of a very temporary nature, and that to get them in their proper perspective it is only necessary to step back a few thousand light years' (Stableford, 2007). For Shaw, realist fiction was mere reportage and expressed the predictability of arithmetic, whereas science fiction was an attempt to grasp the chaotic, unknown quantities of algebra. Shaw suggests that the science fiction genre introduces an element of contingency to mundane reality, causing the reader to question that reality and the structures that underpin it.

This juxtaposition of the mundane and the fantastic is a typical quality of Shaw's fiction, the fantastic invariably embodied by a fictional technology. Shaw's 1966 story 'The Light of Other Days', his second published story following his return to science fiction in 1965, appeared in *Analog* magazine, the new name for Campbell's *Astounding* from 1960 onward. The story unpacks one implication of the fictional technology 'slow glass', a substance that reduces the speed of light to such an extent that images of events are seen long after they have taken place. Shaw's story depicts a bickering couple walking through a rural landscape in the Scottish Highlands and arriving at a farm of slow glass windows soaking in the idyllic scene. The closure of the narrative, which reveals the owner of the farm keeping slow glass images of his deceased wife and child to console him following their death in a car accident, is typical of Shaw's concern with rehearsing the implications of technological change its interaction with quotidian individual lives. Shaw's follow-up slow glass story, 'Burden of Proof' was completed with input from John W. Campbell, with whom Shaw conferred with by telephone. Unsurprisingly Campbell suggested switching the location of the story from Scotland to America. The story centres on a Judge Kenneth Harpur, adjudicator in a double murder and rape case made controversial by the presence of a five-year thick piece of slow glass at the scene of the crime. Harpur had sent the accused in the case, Ewan Raddall, to the electric chair, but five years later the glass is being carefully monitored for final proof of Raddall's guilt. Whereas in 'Light of Other Days', slow glass is depicted as a kind of enhanced photograph which serves to remind the farmer of lost loved ones, 'Burden of Proof' amplifies the effects deployed by the technology, implying that slow glass is a technology with the power to undermine legal institutions. The slow glass stories began Shaw's science fiction career in earnest, and Shaw explores the technology fully in the novel *Other Days, Other Eyes* in 1972, a volume that also gathers the shorter slow glass works as 'sidelights' to the main narrative.

Shaw's other science fiction works are too numerous to go into in detail here. Shaw's first novel *Night Walk* (1967) expresses a similar concern with the effects of technology on the individual and society. The novel takes the form of a third person



space adventure narrative, with the protagonist Tallon a prisoner on the planet Emm Luther. Despite being blinded, Tallon utilises technology both to make his escape and to attempt to bring the universe to peace. The orientation towards resolution in *Night Walk* is interesting in a Northern Irish context, as is Tallon's membership of an organisation known as the Block, a paramilitary group dedicated to maintaining a political link between Earth and its planet colony Emm Luther. Other interesting examples of Shaw's fiction include the 1969 novel *The Palace of Eternity*, in which, in a plot twist worthy of Shaw's hero Van Vogt, the protagonist dies halfway through the narrative but still remains the point of view character. *Ground Zero Man* (1971) depicts a mathematician who attempts to force the nuclear powers to disarm by designing a trigger that can explode every nuclear weapon in the world simultaneously. Shaw also wrote two science fiction trilogies. The Orbitville trilogy (1975, 1983, 1990), follows the implications of the discovery of a vast sphere in space with land equivalent to five billion earths, and the Land and Overland trilogy (1986, 1988, 1989), describes a planet with another planet within its own atmosphere and a civilisation that has advanced to space flight without the aid of industrial civilisation.

However, Shaw is perhaps known just as much for his fan activity as for his fiction. Shaw received Hugo awards for his fan writing in 1979 and 1980, an honour that his fiction never received, despite being nominated. Shaw was also well known within science fiction fandom for his 'Serious Scientific Talks' which he would give at conventions, satirical speeches in which he combined in-jokes with other fans, with commentary on the state of science fiction and the fan community and Flann O'Brien-like scientific speculations. Such was Shaw's standing in science fiction circles that by Arthur C. Clarke passed his name to film director Stanley Kubrick as a scriptwriting replacement for Brian Aldiss. Kubrick had fired Aldiss at the preparation stages of an adaptation of Aldiss's short story 'Super-Toys Last All Summer Long', the film that was eventually completed by Steven Spielberg in 2001 as *A.I.* Shaw was in turn also fired by Kubrick for leaving the country unannounced. Funnily enough, to attend a science fiction convention in Canada (Baxter, 1997).

As well as engaging in science fiction fandom together, Shaw and White also worked together at Short Brothers in Belfast. By all accounts, Shaw recommended his friend White for a public relations position, and White offered his science fiction as proof of his ability to write. While Shaw's science fiction epiphany occurred while reading the chaotic fictional realms of Van Vogt, White's major influence was the more traditional space opera of E.E. Doc Smith, White claiming that Smith's work that made him realise that there was no requirement for aliens to be evil in a science fiction story. White's early employment included working as a draper for various Belfast tailoring firms and a Belfast Co-Operative department store, before joining Shorts in 1965.

White is best known for his Sector General stories, set on a vast space station that serves as a hospital for a heterogeneous assortment of injured alien organisms, whose care is informed by a four-letter categorisation system that denotes the kind of atmosphere suitable for the patient. White placed the first Sector General story in *New Worlds* magazine in 1957. Although the series began before the official beginning of the Troubles in 1969, the influence of navigating the discourses and identities that fed into the conflict can be felt in White's utopian depiction of what the science fiction critic Sherryl Vint might term an 'ethical multi-species community' (Vint, 2012). Recurring characters in the series include the psychologist O'Mara whose main task is to guard against outbreaks of xenophobia in the hospital, Doctor Conway, a surgeon who is depicted receiving tapes of alien physiologies in order to perform operations on other species, and Prilicla, an insect-like alien with heightened empathy. In the Sector General novel *Star Surgeon*, White writes of the crew that 'pacifists all, they waged a constant, all-out war against suffering and disease whether it was in individuals or whole planetary populations.' In White's Sector General universe the practice of medicine becomes a means through which potential tribal conflicts between alien cultures are curtailed.

White's standalone novels also draw from the material reality of the region in which he lived. A 1966 *Belfast Telegraph* article on White suggests that 'working in Short's he finds he can put his hands on technical journals to give him a bit of background information'. The aviation industry in which White and Shaw worked is referenced in

the novel *Tomorrow is Too Far* (1971), set in the Hart-Ewing aerospace company. In White's narrative, Carson, the chief security officer at Hart-Ewing, is investigating a possible conspiracy at the plant. When Carson finds notes for a space-drive project, White parodies his own and Shaw's writing efforts, the security guard pondering about whether he has just simply stumbled across 'some engineer author's notes for a science-fiction story.'

White also produced two thinly-veiled allegories of the Troubles that are worth considering in more detail here: 1974's *The Dream Millennium* and 1979's *Underkill* both set in a future Belfast redrawn as a gothic dystopia. *The Dream Millennium* is the more utopian of the two novels, a space adventure narrative focusing mainly on the crew aboard a starship captained by Brother Howard, a former astronaut who was subject to a religious revelation while on his first space mission. Howard plans to escape an Earth culture in decline, in particular the influence of the Maxxers, who espouse a philosophy of maximum violent response to conflict. Howard's ship travels through space carrying humans in suspended animation with which to seed a habitable planet. The human specimens on board have been carefully selected by Howard for their orientation towards peaceful conflict resolution, the novel presuming that kindness and a propensity for nonviolence are genetically transmitted.

White's sequel to the novel, *Underkill*, proposes an extraterrestrial solution to conflict on Earth, with the alien race the Trennechorans observing the planet from afar, diagnosing it with a malady, and making strategic interventions in the shape of bombings, murders and natural disasters. At one point, the narrative suggests that the Trennechorans gave humanity nuclear technology in order to promote peace. The violent intervention of the Trennechorans complicates White's stance as a pacifist. White frames their actions in medical terms, referencing an intensive care manual throughout the text, which he accessed through his wife Peggy, who worked as a nurse at the Mater Hospital in Belfast. The Trennechorans are described as wanting to rid the world of the cancer and 'emotionally desensitised tissue' that is causing its sickness. As Patrick Maume notes, White had an idealised view of the medical profession, having wished to become a doctor when he was younger, and

he often suggested that without the British NHS he would have died from the diabetes he suffered for all his life.

Discussing the Sector General series, the science fiction critic John Clute writes that 'in the depiction of goodness may lie the real genius of James White' and that in White's universe 'the Good is normal, and...the problem of Evil...is operable' (p. 8). This notion of a selection process that weeds out evil and promotes goodness resonates across White's fiction. Clute's suggestion of the problem of evil as operable suggests that White's utopian vision involves treating humanity as a medical puzzle to be solved.

In 1984 White took early retirement from Shorts, his vision impaired by the diabetes he had suffered his entire life. White and his wife relocated to Portstewart in Northern Antrim, and White began devoting all his time to writing science fiction, in particular further entries in his Sector General series. A standalone novel appeared in 1991 called *The Silent Stars Go By*, an alternate history narrative that proposes a Hibernian Empire that discovered steam power in its prehistory, utilising it to power the ships that helped Saint Brendan discover America. White depicts the Hibernian Empire launching its first starship the *Aisling Gheal* in an attempt to colonise a recently discovered habitable planet. White's protagonist Healer Nolan is an atheist, but priests and clerics dominate the narrative. This is an explicitly Catholic future, the narrative closing with the conniving Bishop O'Riordan handed an alien world to convert to Christianity by the atheist Nolan. Nolan forgives O'Riordan for the sin of attempting to create a purely Christian planet, by stranding Nolan and other non-Christians from the main body of colonists. Nolan returns to Earth's orbit and establishes contact with N.A.S.A., who dispatch a priest called Father O'Neill and an engineer called Donovan to translate the Gaelic and Latin with which he communicates. In this narrative closure, White signals that, having ensured peace on the new planet through Christianity, the return of the Hibernians will now sew that peace on Earth.

White's Christian message would seem to jar with the idea of hard science fiction we discussed earlier, in particular to John W. Campbell's advice to his charges that 'the

boys don't like mysticism'. However, this interest with exploring spirituality and the irrational through science fiction links White to Ian McDonald's later work in the genre, particularly in the text around which provided the initial inspiration for this exhibition. Whereas White's view of the future is a reductive and almost hygienic vision of washing badness away or cutting it out like a cancer, McDonald's presents a future that is fragmented, prosthetic and hybridised. In *Scissors Cut Paper Wraps Stone*, Ethan Ring's pilgrimage through 21<sup>st</sup> Century Japan to find redemption for creating the fracter is rife with references to spirituality. In the book McDonald connects spirituality to cyber culture explicitly, describing zen as a state 'one enters in which I and you cease to matter, where subject and object are abolished, where you and it become one thing, one unity, one awareness. True cyborg: man/machine fusion.' If a science fiction taboo surrounding mysticism, spirituality and the irrational existed, cyberpunk was the second time it was broken in genre science fiction, the first time being new wave science fiction's embrace of the irrational in the 1960s. The template for much cyberpunk is William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer*, which introduced the concept of cyberspace as a consensual computer-generated hallucination and depicts an Artificial Intelligence called Wintermute that longs to transcend and become sentient. The critic Dani Cavallaro points to the return of mysticism in cyberpunk science fiction, suggesting that 'on one level contemporary technoscience seems to perpetuate the rationalist approach preached by the Enlightenment. On another level, the Gibsonian configuration of cyberspace as a hallucinatory experience alludes to science's involvement with the irrational...cyberculture thrives on these ambiguities: rationality and irrationality coexist within its territory...one of cyberpunk's main contributions to contemporary reassessments of knowledge and agency lies in its fusion of mythological and technological motifs'(Cavallaro, 2000).

McDonald dips in and out of cyberpunk territory throughout his body of work, and *Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone* is one of the most explicit examples of his writing in the subgenre. The world of the novel is a fragmented near future, Belfast's experience of 'post-industrialisation with a vengeance' in the 1990s is reflected in the idea of a post-industrial revolution in which work is performed remotely. Europe is

united, but geopolitical shifts are signified in the McDonald's references to the political blocs of Pan-Islam and the Confederation of Black American States. As already touched upon, McDonald's novel also examines the marriage of the technological and the spiritual. Across his work, McDonald locates the nagging persistence of the mystical and the transcendent in amateur astronomy, nanotechnology, designer drug culture, and the colonisation of the moon.

Unlike Willis, White and Shaw, McDonald was not born in Belfast, but in Manchester to a Scottish father and an Irish mother, the family moving to Belfast in the mid-1960s. In an interview with *Territories* magazine, McDonald suggests that this gave him an outsider's perspective on Northern Irish society (Gibson, 1992). The period of McDonald's career crosses over slightly with that of Shaw and White, beginning with the publication of his story 'The Islands of the Dead' in *Extro* magazine in 1982 and his first novel *Desolation Road* in 1988. McDonald is perhaps best known for what Jack Fennell describes as his 'parochial novels' in which McDonald extrapolates from the present of a country in the so-called developing world, imagining how it will be affected by technology and geopolitics into the future. McDonald's first parochial work were the future-Kenya novels *Chaga* (1995) and *Kirinya* (1997) in which a meteor strikes Kenya and releases a plague that begins to transform the landscape and people, moulding them to its alien designs. These were followed by the most famous of McDonald's parochial novels 2004's *River of Gods*, the winner of a BSFA award. The novel imagines a future India fragmented into smaller and smaller states. This was followed by the short story collection set in the same future India *Cyberabad Days* (2009), after which McDonald turned his futurological lens on Brazil, in *Brasyl* (2007), and Turkey, in *The Dervish House* (2010). McDonald's parochial works blend speculations on advanced technology with local traditions, such as the blurring of the line between nanotechnology and djinn mythology in *The Dervish House* and the A.I.s named after Hindu deities in *River of Gods*.

An often-neglected aspect of McDonald's work is his Irish Trilogy, comprising *King of Morning*, *Queen of Day* (1991), *Hearts, Hands and Voices* (1992) and *Sacrifice of Fools* (1996). In many ways, 1991's *King of Morning, Queen of Day* rehearses many of the ideas that McDonald expands upon in the parochial novels. The novel depicts

three generations of the same family, beginning with the story of Emily Desmond, told in epistolary form in the first section of the novel, entitled 'Craigdarragh'. Emily is a teenager living in Sligo in 1913 who is obsessed with the Gaelic Revival and the poetry of W.B. Yeats and becomes convinced that she is communing with faery folk on the grounds of her Anglo-Irish parents' estate. McDonald juxtaposes excerpts from Emily's diary with entries from her father Edward, an amateur astronomer and dedicated scientific rationalist. While observing the night sky, Edward predicts that the arrival of Bell's Comet into the Earth's atmosphere heralds the arrival of extraterrestrial beings. McDonald cannily destabilises genre categories, setting the flights of fancy provoked by Edward's astronomy against the concrete circumstances of the Home Rule crisis, inspired in part by the Gaelic Revival that so obsesses his daughter Emily. Edward is subject to ridicule by the Royal Academy for his project to contact the aliens and McDonald's novel seems to suggest that the scientific produces the fantasy, whereas the fantasy of the revival produced concrete effects. The latter sections of *King of Morning, Queen of Day* are set respectively in a Free State Dublin in which vagrant characters inspired by Beckett attempt to redraw the 'mythlines' that underpin reality, and a cyberpunk influenced future Dublin open to a globalised culture obsessed with Japanese anime and rave music. Both contain useful connections to the parochial works and their tendency to combine depictions of technological progress with the persistence of local traditions.

*Hearts, Hands and Voices*, the second novel of McDonald's Irish trilogy, is a future allegory of the Irish War of Independence and subsequent conflicts, in which each of the component identities is given an estranged counterpart. The British Empire is simply estranged as the highly militarised and technologically advanced Empire, holding dominion over the village of Chepsenytt, where the protagonist Mathembe lives. Mathembe is part of a group called The Confessors, an estranged signifier for the Catholic/Nationalist identity, who possess an ability to breathe life into inanimate matter resulting in organic entities called 'organicals' with which they provide themselves with houses, vehicles and food. The origins of the Confessor's nanobiological technology lies in the distant past and is referred to as The Green Wave, a time when the Confessors learned the cell-names of living things and began

utilising them to create a society of abundance. In contrast, the Proclaimers signify the Protestant/Unionist identity, their civilisation known by the artificially made glass cobbles of their cities. McDonald utilises science fictional estrangement to propose the Listeners as a resolution to the conflict, a commune drawn from both traditions that use both organic and artificial technologies to build an ethical community. An important aspect of Listener culture is a modification of the Green Wave virus with which the Confessors manipulate genetic material. Echoing White's Sector General series, those infected with this modification are incapable of racial hatred, and attain the ability to communicate without the use of speech. Mathembe interprets the virus as a 'love plague' that is passed through bodily fluids, 'a disease that makes its victims incapable of violent aggression towards each other and simultaneously reconciles them through intimate identity with each other.' Mathembe's brother is a member of the paramilitary group the Ghost Boys, and Mathembe goes to meet him with the intention of passing the love plague to him. With the conflict in Northern Ireland still ongoing, McDonald tellingly ends the narrative of *Hearts, Hands and Voices* before the full implications of the virus are developed.

When McDonald returned to Irish material in 1996's *Sacrifice of Fools*, it was to take a sceptical look at the peace process then underway. McDonald imagines a Belfast in the midst of a power-sharing arrangement between London and Dublin. When an alien race called the Shian arrive on Earth, Northern Ireland must take its share of refugees, some of them housed in the derelict Harland and Wolff shipyard. McDonald uses the Shian customs of sexuality, community and education to undermine binary identities in Northern Ireland, commenting on the neglect of alternative identities by the Good Friday settlement. The protagonist Andy Gillespie is a former Loyalist prisoner who received the orally transmitted Shian language from a Shian friend in prison. Upon his release, Gillespie decides to utilise his knowledge of Shian language, by taking a job at a Shian Welcome Centre. Like the other novels in the Irish trilogy, *Sacrifice of Fools* combines postcoloniality and futurology, which provides a useful connection to McDonald's parochial novels, which performs the same estrangements on Kenya, India, Brazil and Turkey. McDonald's novels articulate the local and the global, the postcolonial and the futuristic, while refusing



the stasis of realist fiction. The future for McDonald is fragmented, prosthetic and hybridised, and his novels locate this condition in all of these locales, including Ireland.

To conclude the, the interaction of Northern Ireland with capitalist modernity made the emergence of a science fiction tradition in the region inevitable. This interaction threw up a character like Robert Cromie, fascinated with engineering culture and speculating on its future developments and applications. Bob Shaw and James White continued this tradition, with Ian McDonald articulating a science fiction imaginary in a more globalised and post-industrial mode. Perhaps the reason that Northern Irish science fiction has been ignored in studies of Irish modernity is the modern tendency to separate. F.R. Leavis responded to C.P. Snow's suggestion of the existence of two cultures: science and literature by suggesting that science could never match the profundity of Shakespeare. Science and Technology Studies, particularly the branch circulating around the French philosopher Bruno Latour, argues that this act of separation is part of the modern contract. We separate nature and culture, while in the process ensuring that we keep creating more and more hybrids of the two (Latour, 1993). We separate science from culture, the modern from the pre-modern, and the high from the so-called low culture, with the result that forms such as science fiction end up outside the boundaries of what are termed canon. I hope to have gone some way in showing why in the case of Northern Irish science fiction, and by extension, science fiction across the island should not remain secret any longer.

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