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## Scotland, the Cradle of Comics

WHY QUESTION *WHY COMICS*? IN MANY WAYS THIS BOOK DOES EVERYTHING: IT PROVIDES AN INSIDER'S OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY AND context of comics, deftly introduces some of the leading current creators and creations, and adopts a thematic approach that allows each chapter to raise broader societal questions. It is erudite, well-illustrated, clearly expressed, and fun. End of story? If it were, this series of essays would be the *PMLA* equivalent of a Chris Ware comic book in which nothing happens.

It is the snappy subtitle that takes us farther: *From Underground to Everywhere* summarizes the mushrooming spread of comics culture, but if we take Chute's "everywhere" literally, at least one place is missing from her discussion: Scotland. Known for its whisky, Highlands and islands scenery, castles and kilts (all of which, incidentally, feature in numerous graphic novels), Scotland is the cradle of comics but also its teenage bedroom and grown-up crash pad, with ample room for (Franco-Scottish Auld Alliance) guests.

Let us start with the cradle. The debate over who or what should receive the accolade of "world's first comic" took center stage at a 1996 Angoulême conference, *Les origines de la bande dessinée* ("The Origins of Comics") in which the centenary of the Lumière brothers' first film (*Workers Leaving the Factory* [1895]) was celebrated alongside that of R. F. Outcault's *Yellow Kid* (Groensteen), the lovable guttersnipe whose adventures appeared in *The World* (also known as *The New York World*). Many histories of comics give *Yellow Kid* as the world's first comic strip—indeed, Chute cites it as a turning point (8)—but the French contingent was keen to point out that the real inventor of comics was Rodolphe Töpffer, the Genevan schoolteacher whose burlesque adventures, such as *Histoire de Mr. Jabot* (1835; "The Story of Mr. Jabot") and *Les Amours de Mr. Vieux Bois* (1837; "The Loves of Mr. Jabot"), mixed text and image for the amusement of his pupils.<sup>1</sup> The title "world's first comic" remained in Switzerland until recently, when the *Glasgow Looking Glass* came to the fore (fig. 1).<sup>2</sup>

LAURENCE GROVE

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The *Glasgow Looking Glass*, which first appeared in 1825, was the creation of William Heath (1794–1840), who had left London to flee his debts but also to produce a Battle of Waterloo panorama—a 360-degree image-based show popular at the time—on Glasgow’s Buchanan Street. The magazine consisted of four pages, mixing caricature of local and international politics, fashion, and personalities with informational pieces. It was a proliferation of pictures, which, according to John Strang, writing about Glasgow’s history in 1856, “for many months during the year 1825, kept the members of the Police Board in hot water and the citizens in roars of laughter, and contributed not a little by the cutting ridicule of its pictorial illustrations and its literary typography, to arrest the force of pitiless *muck*” (339).

In issue number 4 began “History of a Coat” (fig. 2), “to be continued” (as the text tells us with the foresight of a phrase that is now familiar to all comics fans) in numbers 5 and 6. Presented in a sequence of square or rectangular frames—eight in number 4, six in number 5, four in number 6—and with text beneath the images for the second and third episodes, the story starts with a scene depicting the shearing of the sheep whose wool makes the dandy’s coat (4: 3)<sup>3</sup> and then shows the skirmish in which it becomes torn and thence discarded (4: 3), passed from owner to owner down the social scale (5: 2–6: 3), to end up as pig feed for the “End of the Tail” (6: 3). Gentle humor matches social observation, through an object that serves as central character in a manner later to be adopted by Robert Crumb and Chris Ware. *History of a Coat* can hang itself on the peg of first modern comic strip in the publication that was the first modern comic.

The *Glasgow Looking Glass* ran for seventeen issues, the first appearing on 11 June 1825 and the last on 3 April 1826.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, there are several indications that the short run was not due to lack of suc-

cess. Quite the contrary. From issue 6 the title changed to *Northern Looking Glass*, presumably a sign of renown and appeal beyond Glasgow. This is supported by the list of outlets given at the end of each number: at first, distribution was limited to Glasgow, but by issue 16 sellers are listed in London, Cambridge, Liverpool, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Greenock, and Paisley. Success may in fact have been Heath's undoing, as a manuscript addition to a copy in Glasgow's Mitchell Library points to his having made enemies and thus needing to flee back to London.<sup>5</sup>

Nor was that the end of the *Looking Glass*. The publication reemerged on 1 January 1830, published in London by Thomas McLean and "Drawn and etched by William Heath—author of the *Northern Looking Glass*—Paul Pry caricatures<sup>6</sup>—and various humorous works," as the title page informs us. Among the caricatures distributed by McLean in other publications are many pieces by John Doyle (1797–1868), father of Richard Doyle (1824–83), who, alongside John Leech and John Tenniel, was the mainstay of *Punch*. First published in 1841, *Punch* is known worldwide for having introduced the modern notion of a "cartoon" in 1843, as Hillary Chute points out (6–7). But similarities in style—for instance, the use of the character of Punch himself—and the connections between contributors suggest that the *Glasgow Looking Glass* was, in all likelihood, a guiding influence on *Punch*.

Why then has this gone unnoticed, as has an intervening publication (with fewer illustrations), the *Glasgow Punch*, published in 1832 (fig. 3)?<sup>7</sup> And if the *Glasgow Looking Glass* is the world's first modern comic, why do the history books not say so? We can only surmise that for many decades the notion of world's first comic did not interest scholars and that the *Looking Glass* appealed to them only as a local historical artifact. Indeed, many of the University of Glasgow copies are found in David Murray's collection, which contains some 23,000 items relating largely

to the economic, cultural, and social development of the West of Scotland from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries (“Murray Collection”). When “world’s first comic” did become an academic accolade—around the time of the 1996 Angoulême conference—the fact that online cataloguing facilities had not yet been fully developed meant that an ancient Scottish university, not being first port of call for researchers in this field, could easily have been overlooked. The expansion of the literary canon that has since allowed comics to be everywhere, including on syllabi previously occupied by Chaucer and Shakespeare, has gone hand in hand with a democratization of technology that permits people to consume and collect culture everywhere, not just in ivory bastions.

With a shifting canon comes ambiguity, and ambiguity is at the heart of the question we have in hand. The attribution of the accolade of world’s first comic depends on how we approach and define *comic*, a question that Hillary Chute has asked and one that has been the subject of some dispute. On a formal level one could argue for or against the need for frames, speech bubbles, or even text. From a reception viewpoint, one could ask if a comic needs to be mass-produced, something people can therefore easily own and then potentially throw away. If it does, chances are the *Glasgow Looking Glass* will keep the title of the world’s first, since it was lithography that, beginning in 1818, first allowed for the large-scale reproduction of images.<sup>8</sup> If, however, industrial distribution is not a criterion, then arguably we have always told stories with pictures, from cave art onward.

Such was the central caveat of the Comic Invention exhibition, originally planned to showcase the *Glasgow Looking Glass*. Held at Glasgow’s Hunterian Art Gallery from 18 March to 17 July 2016, Comic Invention drew crowds on a par with those at the popular Charles Rennie Mackintosh retrospectives, as well as international media coverage. It

was the catalyst for two further displays: one in Clydebank, underlining local comics culture,<sup>9</sup> and a larger one in Kelvingrove, which promoted the culture of comics through the work of Frank Quitely.<sup>10</sup> Scotland is clearly at home with comics.

Comic Invention did present the *Glasgow Looking Glass*, alongside Töpffer's *Mr. Jabot*, but a surrounding time line also took the visitor back to Egyptian hieroglyphs, through medieval storytelling illuminations, to a *Biblia pauperum*, and then on to William Hogarth and Thomas Rowlandson.<sup>11</sup> The message that image narratives have always existed was then matched by the notion that the themes of narratives remain eternal, so that the fifteenth-century *Cent nouvelles nouvelles* ("One Hundred New Stories") can draw us in through its bawdy humor and risqué references to bed-hopping as effectively as might an episode of the horror-comics series *Flinch*, produced by DC's Vertigo imprint, in which voyeurism defines an enticing but tragic relationship.<sup>12</sup>

The juxtaposition of past and present was achieved by a system of podia that placed the time-line artifact next to the page of comics art selected to echo its theme (fig. 4). The contemporary artist chosen throughout was Frank Quitely, whose range allowed for the intermingling of mainstream comics—*All Star Superman*, for many fans the new divinity, which was placed next to Wenceslas Hollar's 1662 *Story of Abraham*, an engraving of scenes from the Book of Genesis—with edgier Vertigo productions that do not comply with the Comics Code.<sup>13</sup> Such an arrangement might be compared to that of Chute, whose exploration of themes such as sex, the suburbs, girls, and war makes connections across time and formats. Implicitly, her approach explodes the traditional canon, which orders works chronologically and places them in discrete genres. And what better catalyst for such an explosion than comics, which function through controlled fragmentation and

the interaction of potentially conflicting elements—image and text?

Frank Quitely served as the ambassador for the potential of contemporary comics, drawing on his top-seller status through work for DC and Marvel. His clear-cut style suits Clark Kent, but his iconoclastic touches play out in the background details—like the pair of buttocks that appears in a skylight window in a crowded townscape or the overweight guest whose plate is laden with cakes at a wedding buffet (fig. 5).<sup>14</sup> With Frank Quitely we never quite know what to expect, what the next direction might be, or how the connections will be made. The link with Chute and, more broadly, with comics and the collapse of the canon is again there to be made.

The Frank Quitely connection is geographic as well as thematic. Born Vincent Deighan in Glasgow in 1968, Frank Quitely studied briefly at the Glasgow School of Art and produced his first comics for local publications such as *Northern Lightz* and *Electric Soup*. Not wishing his parents to associate him with his parodies of the Scottish favorite *The Broons*,<sup>15</sup> versions that were, quite frankly, disgusting, he took as his penname the spoonerism by which he is now known worldwide. Frank Quitely continues to live near and work in Glasgow, forming a loop between the world's first comic and one of the hubs of the contemporary scene.

Frank Quitely's high-profile collaborations include work with Grant Morrison and Mark Millar, both of whom hail from Glasgow or its near suburbs, where they continue to live. The (not so) holy trinity has been responsible for some of the most innovative works of contemporary comics, such as *Judge Dredd*, *Flex Mentallo*, *The Invisibles*, *Kick-Ass*, *We3* and *Jupiter's Legacy*.

Why then should Scotland, or indeed Glasgow, be the place that created the modern comic and now nurtures some of the top talent in the field? And are the reasons the *Looking Glass* thrived in Glasgow pertinent

to the buzzing comics scene there today? To attempt a logical explanation of an often illogical phenomenon—the aim of comics criticism in general—we might turn to matters of reception. In 1825 Glasgow was the second city of the Empire, its wealth created from the trade routes to North America and from a population of approximately 147,000, made up largely of what we would today call the working class (*Understanding Glasgow*), which helped make the city an industrial powerhouse. These workers were a natural audience for iconoclastic humor, which filtered down through the distribution of the *Looking Glass* in drinking establishments such as the Hodge-Podge Club, the What-You-Please Club, and the Partick Duck Club (Strang 324–39). Nonetheless, the city also had a rich and cultured elite and cutting-edge technology, including an early lithographic press. A hybrid audience suits a hybrid form, and that continues to be the case: Glasgow is noted today for its bustling and bawdy social scene and affordable studio space, while housing a national opera, theater, orchestra, and ballet, alongside some of the best museums in Europe. Glasgow, like comics, is sophisticated but not “up itself” (to use a local expression). Serendipity is another explanation.

A quirky but key component of the Glasgow comics scene is Metaphrog, the pseudonymous comics duo Sandra Marrs, who creates the artwork, and John Chalmers, who writes the text. Metaphrog, who have earned many international accolades and been nominated for several Eisner Awards, create cult graphic tales that throw light on the darker aspects of daily life, in a way that recalls Charles Burns or Chris Ware, while adding a slightly surreal touch. Best known is their series *Louis*, in which the eponymous central character, a childlike adult, confronts such challenges as ecology and the environment, the pointlessness of daily labor, loneliness and the role we play in society, and the nature of friendship. For *Dreams Never Die*



(2004), the initial book graphics were adapted to animation, with a collaborative soundtrack by Hey (Germany) and Múm (Iceland), creating a multimedia chill-out experience in the face of life's challenges (fig. 6).

Marrs is originally from Montdidier (in France) and Chalmers from Greenock, creating a new alliance that updates the Franco-Scottish Auld Alliance, the centuries-long partnership that flourished in the Enlightenment. Needless to say, Chalmers's Scottish scriptwriting is influenced by French language and culture; the work of his partnership with Marrs echoes the parallel universes created by the creative partners Benoît Peeters and François Schuiten, by Moebius, and by Fred, in his *Philémon* series.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, French influence appears to be a constant in current Scottish comics: Frank Quitely, for example, acknowledges the importance of the *ligne claire* style and underlines his admiration for Moebius.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, when illness prevented Moebius from completing the art for a section of Neil Gaiman's *Sandman: Endless Nights* saga, Frank Quitely stepped in to replace him (fig. 7). Is the Franco-Scottish connection a continuation of history, a sort of geopolitical zeitgeist, or just serendipity?

The Auld Alliance effect works both ways, Scotland also playing a disproportionately substantial role in French comics. The strange sight of Highlanders in kilts during World War I sparked interest in France and provided material for the *Bécassine mobilisée* episode of the adventures of Caumery and Joseph Pinchon's iconic Breton maid (1918), but a key moment in Caledonian influence was perhaps the visit of Jean-Claude Forest's Hypocrite to Scotland, in 1971. Whereas Barbarella had brought blond *bande dessinée* sexiness to outer space, Hypocrite was an earthlier brunette, but she was not without mystery. In *Hypocrite et le monster du Loch Ness* ("Hypocrite and the Loch Ness Monster"), the heroine encounters not only the monster (a female creature who resembles her) but also ghosts,

bagpipes, and an eerie castle, while mingling the clichés with Forest’s trademark eroticism.

More-recent examples of the fascination with Scotland tend to play on contrasts. *Le décalogue*, the best-selling multivolume thriller that ran from 2001 to 2003, opens with the words “Je déteste Glasgow” (“I hate Glasgow” [Béhé and Giroud]). The first volume, *Le manuscrit*, by Béhé and Frank Giroud, introduces *Nahik*, the book that purports to contain Mohammed’s lost writings, and its translator and publisher Simon Broemmecke. The intrigue surrounding this lost decalogue provides mystery and exoticism, set, fittingly, against the backdrop of Scotland’s multifaceted metropolis, ranging from the dockside lair of the (fictional) Clyde Killer to the splendors of the city’s Victoriana, juxtaposed with the tranquility of a nearby highland loch. Striking a different, surreal tone is Tanitoc’s *Amstergow en 8 jours* (fig. 8), located in a fictional conflation of Amsterdam and Glasgow; but here again intuition holds sway over explicit clarity in the search for something lost—in this case, a father.

Elsewhere the Auld Alliance returns to the past. Nicolas Juncker’s *La vierge et la putain* (2015; “The Virgin and the Whore”) is an inventive box set of two volumes that together form a palindrome effect through the mirroring of the lives of Elizabeth I of England and Mary Queen of Scots. Just as the events for the struggle for power play out in parallel, so do the portraits and the page layouts: the volume on Mary’s life opens with images that match those with which Elizabeth’s volume ends, and vice versa. As history tells us, Elizabeth won the day, but it is the Scottish queen who attracts the reader, her passion, fire, and spontaneity contrasting with Elizabeth’s cold, calculating, and pragmatic nature.

Anachronistic history from before even the medieval Auld Alliance underpins one of the biggest sellers of the twenty-first century, *Astérix chez les Pictes* (*Asterix and the*

*Picts* [fig. 9]). Because this *Astérix* was the first volume of the series to be produced after the retirement of Albert Uderzo, the choice of its setting was inevitably high-profile. The scriptwriter, Jean-Yves Ferri, drew on his love for Scotland, creating a tale that plays with traditional myths and clichés—the Loch Ness monster, kilts, tartans—while updating the story through a reference to the 2014 independence referendum (Conrad and Ferri). With the main plotline uniting fractious clans against a common enemy—the Romans—overall the new *Astérix* playfully contrasts facets of Scotland, mixing conviviality and discord.

Nonetheless, it could be argued that the work that underpins the *bande dessinée* obsession with Scotland is in fact not French but Belgian. Hergé's *L'île noire* (*The Black Island*) has obtained cult status through its iconic cover image of the kilted Tintin looking out across the water to a mysterious castle atop a Scottish isle. It was the only album of the series to see three versions: the original, black-and-white version, published in 1938 after appearing serially the year before; the 1943, colored version; and the 1966 update with the market for the English translation in mind, originally published serially in 1965. It is also the album that sees Tintin firmly embracing the culture of the other—thus, the kilt—as opposed to standing apart from it, as he had in his visits to the Soviet Union, the Congo, the United States, and China. It can also be argued that *L'île noire*, with its chases by trains, planes, and automobiles, is the basis for modern adventure narratives such as those of James Bond or Indiana Jones, having itself drawn inspiration from Alfred Hitchcock's cinematic version of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, by John Buchan—a University of Glasgow graduate.

In 2017 a French television crew working for the megaproducer Freemantle Media came to Scotland to create an adventure program about the search for the castle in *L'île*

*noire* (Henry [fig. 10]). The Caledonian odyssey ended on the Isle of Arran with a filmed recreation of the album's cover at Lochranza castle, which Bob de Moor, Hergé's assistant, had sketched when on a fact-finding mission for the 1965 update. Looking closely, we see that the album's castle is an amalgam of Hergé's imagination, visible in the round turret, on the right, and historical documentation, seen in the medieval gridded ramparts of Lochranza, on the left.<sup>18</sup> The television quest concluded with the same mixture of discovery and imaginative fantasy that defines the experience of reading comics, or indeed much of life itself.<sup>19</sup>

As someone who has lived in Scotland for over twenty years I am only too aware that my account is highly personal, but then so is Hillary Chute's, which culminates in the wonderful picture of the author in discussion with a fellow professor in the final section of *Why Comics?*, where she interviews cosplayers (390). But the personal approach does lead to broader conclusions, which is also how comics often work.

The recognition of Scotland's innovative role in the development of comics, and its ongoing creation of and popularity in comics, reflects a shifting geopolitics, whereby megapolises are no longer assumed to be the only cultural hubs. The diversity that this shift implies is connected to the increasingly transnational nature of comics, which makes the specific influences of *bandes dessinées* or *fumetti* ("comics") increasingly difficult to pin down and makes exchanges more and more intricate and commonplace.

To be aware of these issues is to be aware of a question that has always been central to comics studies, that of the nature of the canon. On one level comics can be seen as simply creating a new canon—Alison Bechdel and Ware, for instance, serving as Jane Austen and Marcel Proust had for their generations and Agnès Varda and Jean-Luc Godard, for theirs. On another level, given the rapid

shift, or even disappearance, of the canon, fueled by new technologies of creation and presentation, transnational removal of identity layers, and reception based on crowdsourcing as much as on academic hagiography, the very notion of a history of comics is likely to give way to thematically based connections.

Indeed, such is exactly what *Why Comics?* does, and this question about the canon is exactly the one that Hillary Chute raises.

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## NOTES

1. For a fuller discussion of the debate on the origins of comics, see Groensteen; Grove; and Grove and Black.

2. The little available scholarship on the *Glasgow Looking Glass* is essentially limited to Gardham; McShane; and Grove and Black.

3. In citations of “History of a Coat,” the first number refers to the issue, the second to the page.

4. An attempt was made to revive the journal in May 1826, but this resulted in only two issues in the new series.

5. Heath “is a person of extraordinary talents; but, unfortunately, talents, especially of that kind, and ‘prudent, cautious self-control’ do not always go together. Hence poor Heath has continually been in difficulties. It was on account of debt that he was obliged to quit Glasgow.” Dawson Turner’s note on Heath is slipped between the pages of the Mitchell Library copy of the *Glasgow Looking Glass*. The Mitchell Library, founded in 1877, is one of Europe’s largest public libraries. The collection that holds this volume is largely one relating to local history.

6. Paul Pry was the penname often adopted by William Heath.

7. To the best of my knowledge there has been no scholarly analysis of the *Glasgow Punch* to date. Its full title was *Glasgow Punch: A Weekly Pennyworth of Fun and Frolic, Whim and Whipping*. It ran from 7 July to 1 September 1832.

8. Alois Senefelder first used this method in 1796, but it was not made common knowledge until 1818, when he published *Vollständiges Lehrbuch der Steindruckerei (A Complete Course of Lithography)*.

9. The exhibition at Clydebank, also called Comic Invention, featured artwork relating to the industrial history of the area’s shipyards, as well as the wartime bombings it suffered. It ran from 26 May until 29 July 2017 at the Clydebank Museum and Art Gallery.

10. This exhibition, Frank Quitely: The Art of Comics, ran from 1 April until 1 October 2017 at the Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery.

11. William Hogarth (1697–1764) and Thomas Rowlandson (1756–1827) were English visual satirists often noted as key figures in the development of comics.

12. For an illustrated overview of the exhibition with full bibliographic information on and introductions to the works displayed, see Grove and Black.

13. The Comics Code Authority, instituted in 1954, regulated mainstream comics to ensure they avoided scenes of violence, eroticism, or moral wrongdoing.

14. These details occur, respectively, in Quitely and Morrison, *Flex Mentallo* (5), and Quitely and Grant, *Batman the Scottish Connection* (52).

15. Drawn originally by Dudley Watkins, *The Broons* first appeared in 1936 and remain extremely popular in Scotland, telling the humorous adventures of the eponymous family.

16. Peeters and Schuiten (both born in 1956), Moebius (Jean Giraud [1938–2012]), and Fred (Frédéric Aris-tidès [1931–2013]) are household names in France and Belgium. Their work is eclectic, but all are noted for their creation of sci-fi parallel universes in comics form. For more on these authors, see Grove 46–49, 194–95.

17. The term *ligne claire* (“clear line”), which refers to a style that avoids shading, has been applied to a number of French artists, including Moebius, although it was initially associated with Belgian work—specifically, Hergé’s *Tintin* series.

18. Michael Farr sent me the information about de Moor’s journey to Scotland in an e-mail message (■), to which he attached a photograph of the sketch that I describe here.

19. *Les mystères de Tintin* first aired on TV 5 on 30 December 2018.

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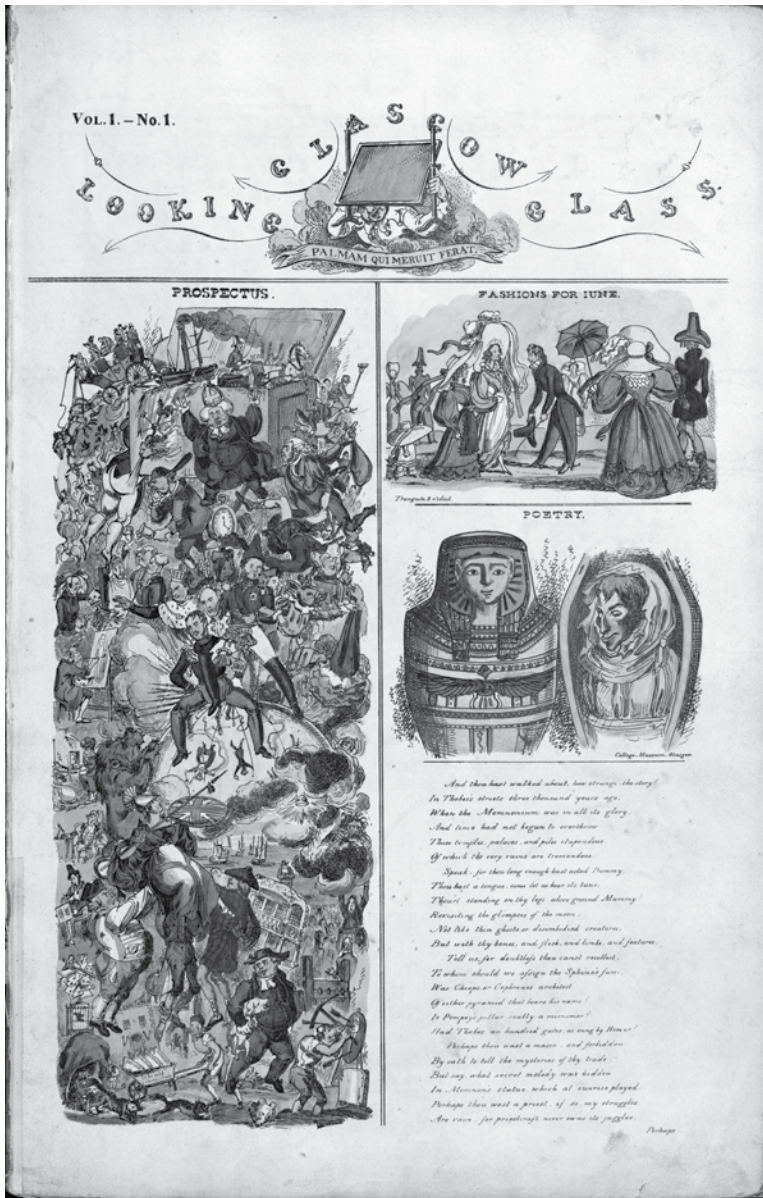


FIG. 1

Front cover of  
*Glasgow Looking  
Glass*, no. 1, 11 June  
1825, Glasgow Uni-  
versity Library.





FIG. 2

"History of a Coat."  
*Glasgow Looking Glass*, no. 4, 23 July 1825, [p. 3], Glasgow University Library.

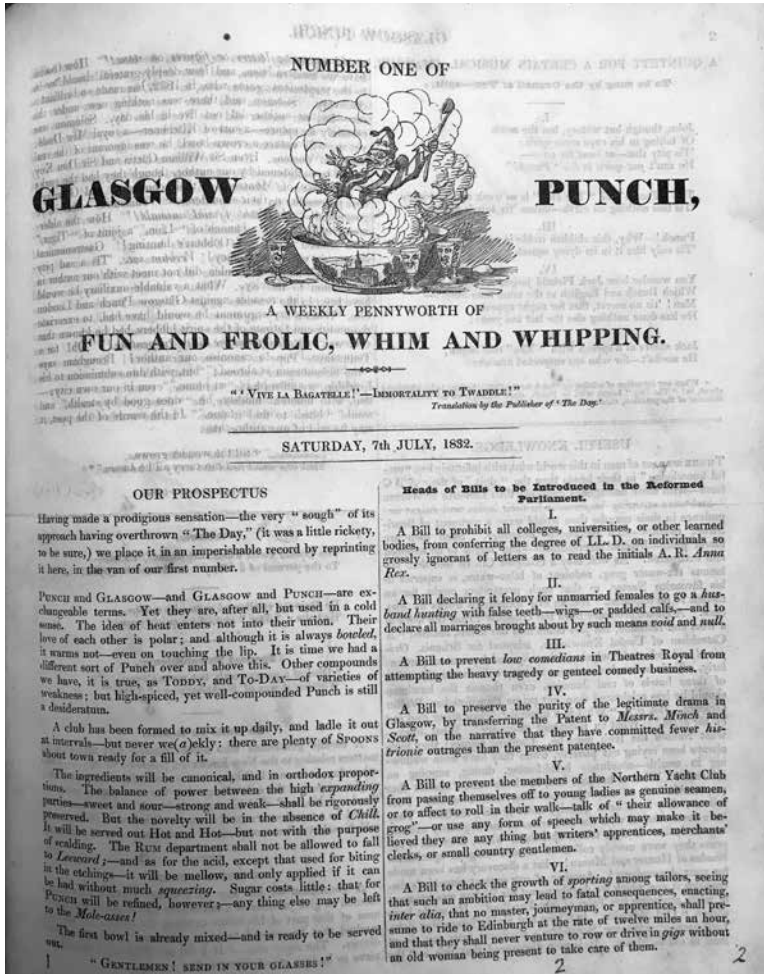


Fig. 3

Front cover of *Glasgow Punch*, no. 1, 7 July 1832, Glasgow University Library.



FIG. 4

Comics art on display at Comic Invention, an exhibition at the Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow. Photograph courtesy of The Hunterian.



Fig. 5

A page from *Batman: the Scottish Connection*, written by Alan Grant and illustrated by Frank Quitely, DC Comics, 1998, p. 52. Reproduced courtesy of Frank Quitely, from his private collection.

# UNCORRECTED PROOFS



FIG. 6

Screen grab from  
*Louis: Dreams Never Die*, by Metaphrog,  
2008, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLz-DZ-yhZg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLz-DZ-yhZg).



FIG. 7

A poster advertising  
*Sandman: Endless Nights*, written by  
Neil Gaiman and  
illustrated by Frank  
Quitely, Vertigo,  
2003. Reproduced  
courtesy of Frank  
Quitely, from his  
private collection.



FIG. 8

Front cover of *Amstergow en 8 jours*, by Tanitoc, Les Humanoïdes Associés, 2003. Reproduced courtesy of Tanitoc, from his private collection.

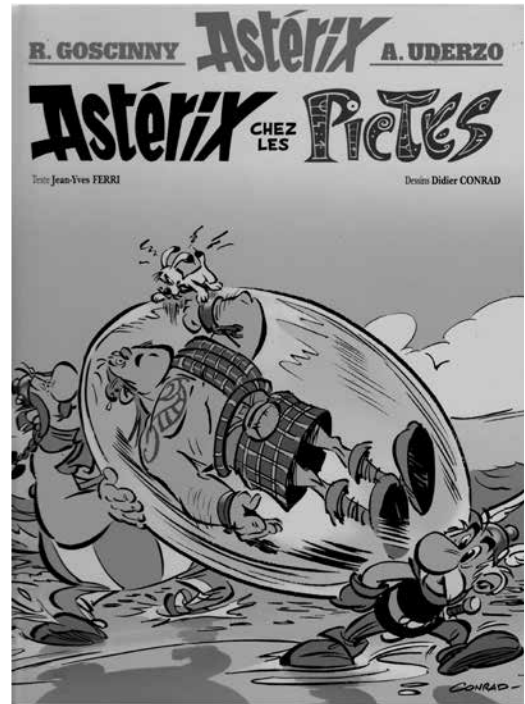
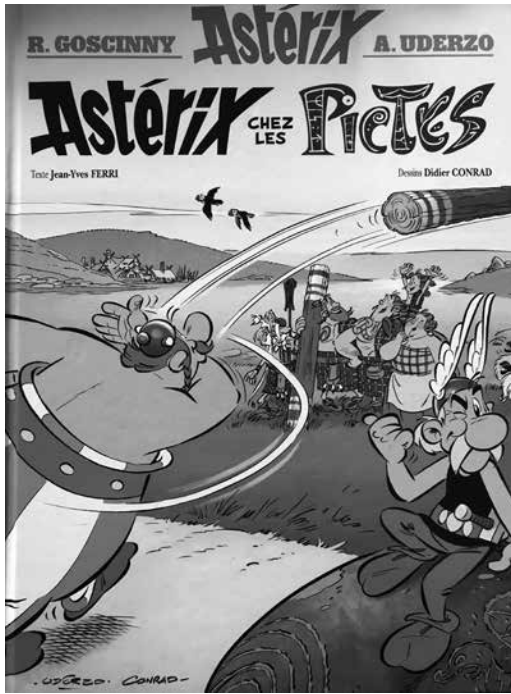


FIG. 9

Two versions of the front cover of *Astérix chez les Pictes*, written by Didier Conrad and illustrated by Jean-Yves Ferri, Éditions Albert René, 2013. Reproduced courtesy of Jean-Yves Ferri, from his private collection.



FIG. 10

Alex Vizeo, a travel blogger covering Freemantle Media's production of *Les mystères de Tintin*, comparing the castle on the cover of *L'île noire* with Kilchurn Castle, Scotland. Photograph courtesy of Olivier Henry.