



## University of Dundee

### The Scientific Muse

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# Wyvern Poets

A detailed illustration of a man with a mustache and green eyes, wearing a black top hat and a dark, double-breasted coat with a white collar and a brown tie. He is holding a golden globe with several thin, golden rods extending from it. The background is a solid dark grey.

**The Scientific Muse**  
Poems for Robert Duncan Milne



# The Scientific Muse

Poems for Robert Duncan Milne

The Wyvern Poets

In association with the Being Human Festival of the  
Humanities and the Centre for Scottish Culture at the School  
of Humanities, University of Dundee

## UniVerse

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Cover designs and illustrations: Faye Williams.

Front cover illustration of Robert Duncan Milne holding his 'Eidoloscope': Amy O'Brien.

Back cover shows the only known photograph of Robert Duncan Milne.

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## **Introduction**

Welcome to the sixth collection by Wyvern Poets, in collaboration with the University of Dundee. This booklet for Dundee's Being Human festival programme on the theme of 'Renewal' celebrates the life and work of Cupar-born Robert Duncan Milne (1844-99). Milne published around sixty Science Fiction stories (some multi-part or novella length), mostly in the *Argonaut* and the *San Francisco Examiner* between 1879 and 1899. He pioneered SF themes such as climate catastrophe, cryogenics, molecular re-engineering of the body, personality transfer, scientific terrorism and drone warfare, remote surveillance and telecommunications, satellite phones and technologies for visual time travel which anticipate cinema and TV. Scotland appears to punch below its weight in relation to early science fiction, yet Milne is an extraordinary lost presence who slipped through the cracks of the canon by a series of historical accidents - until now.

For a recent article about the transatlantic importance of Milne's writing and our plans to republish it, see:

<https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/nostalgia/1900144/cupars-victorian-sci-fi-pioneer-who-imagined-our-world-then-vanished-in-time/>

Keith Williams  
University of Dundee

## **Post Apocalypse**

memory of an awful brightness  
comets cross the inner eye  
vertigo, deafness,  
red sand wilderness and slide of landscape  
memory of the gravest choice  
a button pressed and worlds dissolved  
memory of the fall, the fracture  
in reeking clouds, I foundered  
lost her

echo of her quieting voice  
her Venus shape and siren-song...

...comes a wind, astringent, alien  
reflected and refracted light plays  
with sand grains hot and radiant  
and comes my love  
a floating copy  
she's hornblende, feldspar, mica, clay  
but unexpected aerohaptics  
in jets of air revive her touch  
recharge her kiss.

## **Bet McCallum**

## **Body and Soul**

(from the short story  
'Baron Von Steinbach's Soul')

Sitting opposite  
close enough to touch  
body and soul bound  
in isolation, or should  
I say alienation, as the  
dialectics melt away.  
The soul transported  
to another material self  
to 'stray dogs' that are  
exterminated within  
Dante's circles of hell.  
The body transformed  
brow and butt lifted  
cleft removed  
skin tags and spider  
veins cleansed  
a perfect form.

## **Roy Canning**



## **Moon Dust**

This is the fifth Dark Cycle of the shift.  
and still the lanthanide elements remain  
tight locked in their lunar ores.

Time is strictly Greenwich.

Enrichment has gifted us an ancient city, set under  
overcast skies, with just a clever hint of rain.

The laboratories are never augmented:  
optimal illumination, a whiff of ammonia.  
All maintained at twenty degrees centigrade,  
one hundred kilopascals, terraform normal.  
Resignedly we adopt our viewing stations,  
inured to our monochrome world.  
Except, today, one, no two, no *all* the vessels contain  
hair-like threads, bright red, coiling, writhing.

Later, much later, I get a port to myself.  
I watch the new Earth, an arc of indigo blue  
that negates the blackness. Soothed by its  
reflected light, I dream of what might be.

**Ann Prescott**

### *A New Palingenesis\** Redux

*Milne's Plot: A physician chemically dissolves his dying wife's body in order to reconstitute it using her spirit's captured electrical intelligence in a new youthful body.*

On the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the death  
that you staggered intoxicated into,  
with that street car named destroyer;  
our quantum computer perfected bending space-time  
- a reinvention of your *eidoloscope* - and so we captured  
the exact moment of your mangling,  
recovering your complete cranium  
still fizzing with nerve impulses and beamed it up  
from your truncated and vermillion-fountaining body  
to our lab in a future, that you astonishingly, imagined.  
The MRI copied your connectome, the electrical road map,  
of your mind, which the induction engine uploaded:  
brainwaves, synapse map and all of your lost highways along  
with your evanescent electrical activity to an AI.  
When asked, in your new home, you completed three... and counting,  
collections of short stories.  
Imaginative as ever they were, but somehow,  
lack your former knack for illuminating human dilemmas.  
Of course, this may be due to a bug in your program  
or the burden of captivity, but we don't talk about that.  
We have not – er - cracked yet,  
the cybernetic body transfer problem  
as you so elegantly did in prose,  
but you *appear* happy  
and 'at least'  
you're not  
drinking.

\*'A New Palingenesis' (R.D. Milne, *The Argonaut*, 1883)

**Roddie McKenzie**

## **Plus ça Change**

Professor Vehr's apparatus  
transmits matter,  
reconstructed on receipt –  
and it matters  
to those ancient  
scholars watching Theseus  
sail along  
a new channel.

**Gavin Cameron**

## **Great Minds Think Alike**

(based on the Robert Duncan Milne  
short story 'Brain Transference')

Butcher Ben and surgeon Simon  
had slipped on ice and banged their heads  
they'd ended up in hospital  
lying still in adjacent beds.

Empiric Doctor G could see  
a brilliant chance to start afresh  
combine the microbes from their brains  
their daily job's to cut up flesh.

The screens are drawn, the trephine's out  
grey matter's swapped from head to head  
both men will have enhanced techniques;  
such cerebral success, it's said.

*back at work*

In Ben's shop you'll see on display:  
intestine tripe and muscle mince,  
pectoral chops, bladder burgers,  
if people only knew, they'd wince.

Up-skilled Simon smirks as he hones  
his scalpel on a butcher's steel  
young Jennifer will taste just grand,  
cause he and Ben have struck a deal.

More money to be made, you see  
Ben's shop's a human boucherie.

**George C. Robertson**

## **Find and Replace**

(Suggested by Milne's Eidoloscope invention, where a room's history could be rewound in photographic form, my poem questions the wisdom, should it be possible, of rewinding our life and changing outcomes ... .)

Let's imagine....  
Open your mind.... suspend disbelief  
What if you could rewind your life

*Would you?*

If, like Milne's Eidoloscope, some apparatus, drug or procedure  
Could make it possible

But not a recording .... not a facsimile  
*Your actual life*.... rewind

*Dare you?*

Rewind, pause and delete some unwise or rash decision  
And take the road not travelled

*Could you?*

Press the *FIND AND REPLACE* key  
To go in another direction

*Worth the risk?*

Of meddling with your present situation  
With no guarantee of future proofing

Against mucking it up all over again

**Anita Petrie**

2084

We live in enlightened times, so the politicians insist—  
those wielders of verbicide, who turn to mush antique words,  
once coined from noble thought.  
Their new doctrine forbids unsanctioned touch.  
In our tamed world, passions turn to profit.

Oh yes, we live in enlightened times  
for our prisons lie near empty, as criminals are processed  
and reformed with admirable rapidity.  
For that, we have to thank the newly reimagined  
Versatile Vertiginous Vacuum.

Reports are profuse, the details veracious:  
sent along that crystal bridge between life and death,  
body's base matter melts, while the spirit is contained,  
preserving the insubstantial but most substantial core.  
Dissolution done, the soul must witness its body rebuilt  
in new DNA—undamaged, unspoiled, unremarkable.  
So grows with Chambord-elegance a frame,  
pre-approved of course, guaranteed to allow its  
lodger the chance of a blameless life.

And now the politicians claim with all verisimilitude  
that they have cured the age-old malady, bane since Abel and Cain.  
The soul must still muster itself to be good,  
but their machine stands ready to make and renew on demand,  
as often as need-be.

But gaze into the black-holed eyes of they who are  
cured of their baser instincts.  
What remains?  
A longing,  
for they have seen the other side of the bridge  
and they know now their time here is servitude.  
Oh, veritably, we live in enlightened times!

**Rhoda Neville**

## **The Ghost of Futures Past: to RDM**

You've slipped through cracks  
In space and time, wider and deeper  
Than the San Francisco earthquake's  
But earned a place alongside Maxwell,  
Bell and Baird as shapers of our Metaverse

Auspicious son of a Cupar manse  
Schooled in Genesis and the Classics  
You became an Oxford drop-out  
Then black shepherd of your family  
Ranging Californian outlands

Like one of your own characters, you  
Re-invented yourself in the Wild West  
Of new ideas, technotopian marvels  
In a city, byword for remoteness  
But frontier land to the future

Belated Argonaut to its Gold Rush  
You rushed ahead in time instead  
Staking alternative claims  
In territories of things to come

Displaced a hemisphere  
From folk and country, you reported  
On Globe-shrinking tomorrows.  
The Victorian Internet of telegraph cables  
Spanned your world, but also laid  
The basis of your imagination

It webbed our world with  
Sound and moving pictures  
Transmitted through the ether,  
Populating it with apparitions  
Of the living, disembodied doubles  
Woven from electrons and desire

In an age of steam and gaslight  
You dreamt our world electric  
Scientising telepathic mediums  
Into coming televisual media  
Turning pseudo-psychics into physics  
Séance visions into video link-ups,  
Satellite telephones and  
Panoptic systems of surveillance

Morphing Muybridge into 'Millbank'  
Your Palaeoscopic Camera  
Replayed stored memories  
Stone had photographed  
As virtual moving pictures.  
Your Eidoloscope revealed  
Every buried secret of the past  
But also ran the cinematic race  
For patents neck-and-neck

Born near Frankensburgh-on-Tay  
You modernised the Grandmother  
Of your genre's founding myth of  
Resurrection through electric forces.  
You dreamed of cryogenic afterlives  
And medicated immortality, while  
Slowly embalming yourself alive  
In defiance of the alcoholic gold cure

That fateful night on Market Street  
You stumbled headlong into modernity  
Cusped on your previewed century  
And so into cultural oblivion.  
Eclipsed by Stevenson and Doyle,  
You've left behind a Milne-shaped hole  
That only your own words can now refill

**Keith Williams**



# Epilogue

Now it's your turn to be inspired by the Scientific Muse.  
Insert what you channel into the space below:

# The Wyvern Poets

Formed in April 2017 and based in Dundee, Wyvern poets meet monthly to share ideas, try out new poems and support one another with problems and revisions. There is an emphasis on pursuing writing and strong encouragement to publish. To this end, noteworthy poets who live in and around Dundee are welcomed on a regular basis to read their poems and discuss their techniques, working habits and approaches to publication.

The group was founded by Roy Canning and takes its name from a suggestion by Roddie McKenzie that the wyvern has a particular relevance to Dundee, being a component on a Dundee Seal of 1900 and appearing in different forms throughout the city.

Members of the group share a passion for having fun with words and experimenting with verse forms, perspectives, tone, imagery and the music of lines. Their interests are diverse and their writing styles individual. Among many other themes, those of loss and change, landscape and land, history, memory, emerging technologies and urban life recur across the poets' work, encompassing the spiritual, the personal, the social and the political aspects of life. Poems are written in both Scots and English and are at times purposefully humorous or meditative or edgy or provocative.

Extremely interested in all things local, Wyverns keenly collaborate with city institutions on different writing projects: Echo at Dundee Contemporary Arts Centre, poetry publication with Friends of Dundee Law and the combined arts project with Dundee Botanic Gardens. There is especial pleasure in collaborating with the University of Dundee to celebrate literary anniversaries as here and previously on James Hogg in 'Confessions 2020' and 'Travels in Scotland: Poems for Walter Scott @250. Similarly, the Wyvern poets have been pleased to participate alongside the University in recent 'Being Human' Festivals: 'Frankenstein Returns', 2018; 'Aquatic City', 2019; 'New Worlds', 2020.

Group members' poems have appeared in The Scotsman, The Courier, The Record, New Writing Scotland, Lallans, Gutter, Dundee Writes, Northwords and Seagate III, as well as on numerous online sites based outside Scotland. Several members enjoy ongoing involvement in the series of monthly Dundee renga curated by Bill Herbert.

Contact details:

[wyvernpoets@gmail.com](mailto:wyvernpoets@gmail.com)

<https://wyvernpoets.wixsite.com/dundee>

Tweets @wyvernpoets

## Wyvern Contributors (and Guest)

Gavin Cameron  
Roy Canning  
Bet McCallum  
Roddie McKenzie  
Rhoda Neville  
Anita Petrie  
Ann Prescott  
George C. Robertson

Keith Williams

## Biographies

Roy Canning lives in Broughty Ferry and was one of the original co-founders of the Wyvern Poets. He has been published in anthologies, pamphlets and poems written for local cultural events.

Gavin Cameron has been a member of Wyverns since its formation. He also organises the Dundee & Angus region of National Novel Writing Month and runs the Hotchpotch open-mike night for writers.

Peter Marshall has spent his adult life near the River Tay. He enjoys experimenting with various forms of words to convey his observations, especially on nature and on emotions. Bet McCallum lives in Broughty Ferry and London. She has co-authored three books on primary education. Her short stories, brief memoirs and poems have appeared in *New Writing Dundee*, *Gutter*, *Dundee Writes* and *Seagate III*.

Roddie McKenzie lives in Dundee and has published with the Nethergate Writers since 2006. His poetry and short stories have appeared in *Cairn*, *Lallans*, *Dundee Writes*, *Seagate III*, *Poetry Lab Shanghai*, *Tether End*, *Open Mouse*, *Razur Cuts IX*, *Writers Cafe Magazine* and *New Writing Scotland 35*, and in the Scottish Book Trust book 'Rebel'.

Rhoda Neville recently penned the final lines of her second novel, a ghost story, set near her home by the Tay. She also writes poetry and short stories. In 2020, she won the Constable Silver Stag Award for her first (SF) novel.

Anita Petrie lives in Broughty Ferry. Since retiring, she has become interested in writing poetry. She likes to see the world differently through the lens of poetry and literature.

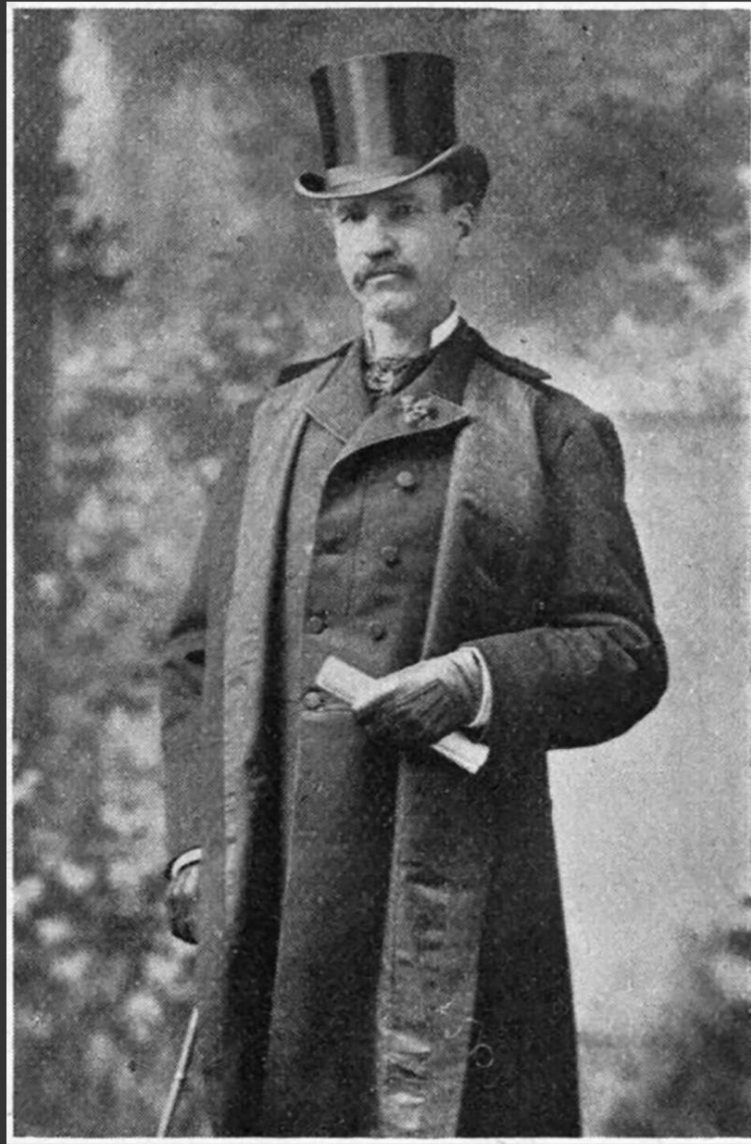
Ann Prescott comes from the Wirral. She has had short stories and poems published in various anthologies. She writes for fun.

George Robertson resides in Broughty Ferry and has been a member of Wyverns since its inception. He writes in both Scots and English, the vehicle used being the one that best relates to the subject. George has seen his work appear in national and international magazines. He is about to self-publish his third, mainly humorous anthology.

Keith Williams is Reader in English at the University of Dundee. He very much enjoys collaborating with the Wyverns on this series of poetry booklets, marking literary anniversaries and the themes of annual Being Human Festival Programmes.







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