

Scotland before the Bomb

M. J. Nicholls

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Sagging Meniscus Press (Dec 1, 2019)

Softcover \$20.95 (250pp)

978-1-944697-80-8

Scotland before the Bomb is a linguistically acrobatic novel that's filled with zany wit and sheer randomness.

There're heaping helpings of dystopia and absurdity in M. J. Nicholls's *Scotland before the Bomb*, a sprawling chronicle in which a Scottish independence vote fractured the country into dozens of tiny nation states. Presented in the form of archived entries compiled by a researcher from the twenty-second century, each of the book's entries documents the rise and fall of the nations. Rampantly imaginative, the book pokes fun at every sort of human folly and hubris.

The book is wild with wacky scenarios from the start, in which neighboring town states fight a cold war, with one deciding to raise itself to a 75-degree angle to spy on its opponent, only to be foiled when the other town buries itself under a tarpaulin to escape surveillance. The population of another town is inspired by a Violent Femmes song to adopt ocelots, with disastrous consequences. And here, Edinburgh has been taken over by Fringe Festival performers to the point where critics are executed and performance art clutters every street.

Like a stream of jokes in a deadpan stand-up routine, the book holds steady with its barrage of insanity, playing with forms. A transcript of an interview conducted with a surviving citizen from a lost nation becomes a laundry list of every chair his leaders sat on; it's a bizarre riff that wouldn't be out of place on a *Monty Python* skit. The tragedies of the nation town Dundee are shared via newspaper clippings detailing improbable events, man-eating ferrets, and spontaneously combusting PMs. A scrap of autobiography from the former prime minister of Selkirk reveals the secret to his success: he apologizes to the public for all of the failings of his stewardship in advance.

As might be expected given the sheer volume of these forays into insanity, some bits are more humorous than others. The book's best passages are those that lean toward a semblance of narrative. One dark comic standout concerns the travails of an ordinary couple in the town of Clackmannan, where everyone is obligated to receive media transmissions while they work out; less than fit individuals soon find themselves hopelessly behind in current affairs. Another high point is an entry on the town of Echt, where every resident is required to assume the identity of a fictional persona, such as a "laconic" or "sympathetic" character. In a rare bit of pathos, the "likable" character in this scenario decides to follow his bliss and form a washboard band, resulting in a major hit to his likability.

Like chapters of a travel guide, this often nonsensical, sometimes indulgent, and entertaining work is best enjoyed in short bursts. *Scotland before the Bomb* doesn't climax so much as collapse in exhaustion, and the book concludes with a lengthy passage from a Glasgow author's unwritten non-novel. The final parade of non sequiturs and abandoned scraps of conversation and plot are metafictional and daunting.

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HO LIN (November 20, 2019)

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