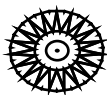


BEYOND

being the  
WIGTOWN EDITION  
of  
A TALE WITHOUT A NAME  
by john francis ward  
incorporating that  
egregious gallimaufry  
of heterogeneous nonsense

**THE  
MCAVINCHEY  
CODEX**



MMXVII

## Prologue: The Forum

Most countries - especially those of ancient origin - have secret organs of state that provide the continuity essential to stable rule. In times of peace they are generally dormant, though they keep a watchful eye, offering timely advice to the ruler or the government; in times of crisis, they are the government. By their very nature, they are discreet, little known; as is often the case, those who do the highest service leave the lightest footprint on the sands of time.

In Scotland, this organ is known simply as *The Forum*.

Its members are not what lazy and unimaginative journalists, reaching for the nearest cliché on the shelf, call (with excruciating predictability) 'The Great and the Good'. Down the ages, some have been downright wicked. Drawn from all walks of life, they may be prominent in their field, but rarely of the first rank - not from any want of talent; more from a preference for the shadows, the edge of the limelight, the unlit corner beside the throne. Let others take the glory - their only interest is the *act*.

They are, as a rule, gifted with imagination. A surprising proportion have been writers or poets. All are sworn to uphold Scotland and pursue her good - by whatever means necessary.

On a certain Tuesday in the first decade of this century, the Forum met to transact its business in hooded session, a requirement invoked only three times since the days of Mary, Queen of Scots. The venue was the Rose Chamber of the Swan Library near the Royal Mile, where so many of Scotland's most historic deeds, good or ill, have been enacted.

The Swan Library is a joke, or at least its name is. Like many a joke, it hides a serious purpose; and like many a joke, it works on different levels. Some, keen to show that they are 'insiders', will tell you it refers to the Signet Library in Parliament Square, home to an association of Scottish lawyers, the Writers to the Signet, said to be the oldest professional body in the world. They date from the fifteenth century. The *Swan* Library, they

will tell you (with a knowing laugh) is so called because it is senior to the *Cygnnet* (Signet).

But the Forum was already old by the fifteenth century, and its meeting place had always been called the Swan - though it was not always a library. For a long time it was an inn.

The Swan was their sign because the swan is the *guardian* of the cygnet - and the Signet is the Royal Seal of Scotland, the objective expression of the King's (or Queen's) authority.

The message is plain: the Forum, met in their appointed place, the Swan, were - and *are* - the ultimate guardians of Scotland: her rule is in their care.

But where is it, this Swan Library?

Even those who have been there could not tell you.

Edinburgh is a city of heights and depths. The hills that provide its foundation (seven of them, like Rome) can now only be guessed at, so swallowed-up have they been by man's construction - for the city is not only built on them, but around them, through them, and under them. There is reckoned to be a whole forgotten city concealed beneath the present one. Some of its passageways - like Mary King's Close - have been opened as tourist attractions. Most are hidden still.

It is by those that the Swan Library is reached. At various locations around Edinburgh, the members of the Forum will arrive - some singly, some in pairs or groups; by car, on foot, perhaps by bicycle. They are places you might pass every day, without a second glance: private houses; office buildings; even pubs and churches. One is simply a door in a wall. Another, in a graveyard, is the iron gate to a crypt.

Through these disparate portals the Forum members pass, then by a network of passages, stairs - spiral and straight - and corridors hidden in the thickness of walls, they converge on their single, secret destination.

The library is a handsome space, with a long polished central table surrounded by walls galleried with books. It is here that the usual business of the Forum is transacted. On this occasion too, the members greet each other briefly, then sit in their accustomed chairs. The meeting is opened and the sederunt taken but then the Convener (a woman and a poet) observes,

‘The hour is late.’

And indeed, the handsome clock that stands by her chair shows that it is nearly midnight. A man - middle-aged, with a grizzled beard - says,

‘Then I move that we adjourn this meeting till another day.’

The proposal is duly seconded, and agreed *nem. con.* The secretary records that the proceedings closed at 11.59.

The clock strikes.

The Convener rises, but does not leave by the door they all entered by. Instead, she works at something in the shelves behind her seat. A portion of them swings aside and she passes through. One by one, a few minutes apart, the others rise and leave by the same way. The last to go is a man of middle age, of nondescript appearance, known to the world (if at all) as a children’s writer of no particular note. He closes the hidden door behind him so that he is momentarily in darkness. Ahead of him, a faint rectangle of greenish light suggests a curtain. He draws it aside and steps into the room beyond, which resembles nothing so much as a school changing-room. On hooks and benches that run round the wall, clothes are hung or folded in piles, some tidy, some not.

The man undresses.

Then, quite naked, he passes through a further opening and enters a short stone corridor. He makes a gesture - the finger drawn across the throat as if to cut it - and behind him, a studied iron door slides down. An identical door shuts off the farther end. The man waits in front of it. There is no handle.