



## Spotlight: Iain Banks



### Biographical Details

Iain Banks (1954-2013) was one of the best-known and most prolific writers to emerge from Scotland in recent decades. Born in Dunfermline and brought up in Fife and Inverclyde, he studied English Literature, Philosophy and Psychology at the University of Stirling and then took a variety of jobs that gave him time to develop his writing, until the success of his first published novel, *The Wasp Factory*, allowed him to write full time. Predominantly a writer of fiction, Banks published thirteen science-fiction novels under the name 'Iain M. Banks' and, as 'Iain Banks', fourteen heavily plot-driven, non-science-fiction novels, several of which were adapted for television or film, including *The Crow Road*, *Complicity* and *Stonemouth*. One recurring characteristic of Banks' 'mainstream' fiction is its use of a wide variety of locations within Scotland, with events in many of his books taking place across several locations, and this interest in Scottish landscape and culture clearly informs his one non-fiction book, *Raw Spirit*.



### Publications of Interest

- *Raw Spirit: In Search of the Perfect Dram* (Century 2003)



### Where to Begin?

- 'Introduction: Out of Our Heads' (*Raw Spirit* pp. 1-6)
- '2: Does not Rhyme with 'Outlay'' (*Raw Spirit* pp. 25-44)
- '6: WhiskyLandWorldVille!' (*Raw Spirit* pp. 111-134)



### Style

- Travelogue
- Social History
- Memoir



### Core Themes

- the history of Scottish whisky
- the freedom/joy of travel
- variety of Scottish landscape/culture



### Contextualising

In writing a book about travelling through Scotland, and in particular the Scottish Highlands, Banks is following in a rich tradition, stretching from Samuel Johnson's *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775) and Dorothy Wordsworth's *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland* (1803) to Edwin Muir's *A Scottish Journey* (1935) and Mike Cawthorne's *Hell of a Journey: On Foot Through the Scottish Highlands in Winter* (2000). There are also obvious parallels with Neil M. Gunn's *Whisky and Scotland* (1935) and Dave Broom's *A Sense of Place* (2022). Like Doctor Johnson, Banks is keen to describe the landscape he is travelling through and to explain the relationships between local communities and their native industries, but his book also reflects at length on more personal topics, such as his friendships with his travelling companions, and his love of cars, motorcycles and travelling in general. Banks does discuss his anger at the UK's involvement in the second Gulf war, which was taking place at the time of his tour, but the tone of the book overall is much more informal and humorous than many earlier books of Scottish travel writing.



### Understanding

Thinking about *Raw Spirit*, consider the following questions, geared towards checking understanding:

- From the Introduction, identify in your own words **three** reasons Banks gives for writing this book.
- Based on your reading of Chapter 2, explain in your own words how the whisky industry started.
- From Chapter 6, summarise how Speyside has capitalised on its image as the 'epicentre' of the whisky world.



### Analysing

Choose one of the features below and explain how Banks uses it in *Raw Spirit*:

Descriptive vocabulary	Structure	Humour	Dialogue	Anecdote
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### Evaluating

Thinking about *Raw Spirit* as a whole, consider the following evaluative questions:

- How successfully has Banks engaged your interest in, and improved your understanding of, the place of **history** in **Scottish culture**? Justify your answer with specific references to the text.
- Reflective writing seeks to give us an insight into the author's **personality** and **values**. To what extent do you feel you have developed an understanding of **Banks as a person** from this book?
- How successfully has Iain Banks managed to convey the **variety of Scotland's landscape**? Justify your answer with specific references to the text.