This has already been a big year for Scotland, and more is yet to come. Next week’s Scottish independence referendum, dominating the news globally in recent days, is the first vote on the question of statehood since 1979, and takes place in circumstances, and among a people, much changed over the past thirty-five years. The eyes of the world (or the former British imperial part of it, at least) had already turned to Scotland’s largest city, Glasgow, where the twentieth Commonwealth Games were held in July. (The twenty-first, incidentally, will be held on Queensland’s Gold Coast.)

While Scotland may evoke images of lochs, isles and bens for many readers, it is also a country highly characterised, and dominated, by its two main cities, Glasgow and the capital, Edinburgh. Although they lie a mere forty-five-minute train ride apart, they share a rivalry as competitive and bitter as Sydney and Melbourne’s, Madrid and Barcelona’s, or Moscow and St Petersburg’s – and perhaps it is all the more antagonistic for the short distance that lies between them. Though Aberdeen, with its GFC-defying oil wealth, may be emerging stealthily as another centre of power, Scotland remains heavily skewed towards the Glasgow–Edinburgh axis. Despite the rivalry, their combination dominates the country politically, socially and culturally.

Indeed, the two cities’ differences and their joint dominance can be seen in the closely watched evidence of their voting preferences in next week’s referendum. With the better-heeled, financial services–fuelled Edinburgh seemingly anxious not to upset the status quo’s applecart, the key referendum battleground appears to be the “red” Clydeside of Glasgow, where unionist Labour once had a strong base yet has been outflanked on social justice issues by the campaign in favour of independence.

This makes Robert Crawford’s biography of the two cities, On Glasgow and Edinburgh, a timely look at a complex relationship. As he points out, this is the first time both cities have been considered together in a “serious volume exclusively devoted to both,” a project that appeals to me as a reader originally from Glasgow. While I will always belong to my hometown, I also greatly appreciate the very different qualities on offer, just a short trip away, in Edinburgh. Living now in Melbourne, I see some similarities with the Sydney–Melbourne rivalry that often seems to dominate Australian cultural life (to the chagrin, perhaps, of residents of the other state capitals, not to mention smaller regional towns). Like their counterparts among other uncomfortable twins, Melburnians and Sydneysiders seem to be at great pains to assert identities based on not being from the other place.

But the Glasgow–Edinburgh competition still seems to me to be a deeper one, with the belonging to one city or the other defining everything from a person’s accent and colloquialisms to what people put on their chips (brown sauce in Edinburgh; ketchup, vinegar or just salt in Glasgow). Glasgow has always seemed to me a bit different from the rest of Scotland anyway, while Edinburgh is a fitting capital, giving a glimpse of culture and traditions from further afield. This may be due to Glasgow’s large Irish-descended population (of which I am a part), its (post)industrial character (arguably giving it more in common with Belfast, Liverpool or Birmingham than with
other parts of Scotland, as Billy Connolly has remarked) and perhaps a certain insularity that comes from being the most populous city but not the country’s capital.

Crawford opens On Glasgow and Edinburgh by exploring this formative rivalry in more detail. Glasgow looks westwards to North America, he argues, while Edinburgh is a staunchly European capital, despite the years of emasculation after the 1707 Act of Union with England, which only ended with the re-establishment of the Scottish parliament in 1999. The cities can also be thought of in a gendered way, with more “feminine” traits attributed to Edinburgh and Glasgow having a more “masculine” character. Each city has had its own “golden age,” with Glasgow’s flourishing strongly tied to the Industrial Revolution and Edinburgh’s having coincided with the Enlightenment a century earlier. And, of course, there is the familiar stereotype: working-class Glasgow is rough around the edges, while aristocratic and bourgeois Edinburgh is snooty.

The book then splits into two parts, of five chapters each, examining Edinburgh and Glasgow in turn. Crawford, a professor of modern Scottish literature at the University of St Andrews, takes the reader on a tour of each city by progressing geographically along various important thoroughfares rather than chronologically. While this ensures that the narrative is more engaging than a linear historical account, it also means that the book is more accessible to those already familiar with both cities’ geography.

Crawford’s literary background is in evidence in his strong focus on the intellectual and creative history of each city, somewhat at the expense of other histories such as the social or economic, or even the very contemporary. While Edinburgh is evidently a grand and historical city, and so, if less obviously, is Glasgow, both cities continue to change and innovate, and their demographic characteristics are constantly being altered by immigration and emigration, a point not well captured in Crawford’s narrative.

Contemporary music and visual arts, especially coming out of Glasgow, are little mentioned in the book, despite the city’s producing a disproportionate share of Turner Prize nominees and winners and a host of world-famous and critically lauded bands, including Belle and Sebastian, Mogwai and Franz Ferdinand. Glasgow as a creative city has been a major selling point of its post-industrial revival, so it is a shame that it does not receive more attention.

Crawford’s account is nevertheless engaging and informative, even for citizens of either city. (I certainly learned a lot, particularly about Edinburgh.) And it captures and helps inform a renewal in interest in Scotland and its largest cities, and their place in the world, in the past, present and a possibly independent future.