

This house, this poem...  
this fresh hypothesis

- Iain Crichton Smith

A brief history of the Scottish Poetry Library





In the Canongate in Edinburgh, not far from the Scottish Parliament, the following words are formed of steel, looping along a facade and round the corner into Crichton's Close: 'a nation is forged in the hearth of poetry'<sup>1</sup>. Just a few metres further down the Close, there is a place which houses the nation's poetry, and more: the Scottish Poetry Library. Twenty-five years ago, long before the revitalised nation voted itself a stronger identity, the SPL had started to gather the written expression of that identity; today it is an institution which holds a unique position in the cultural life of Scotland.

The story of how the SPL came to such a position starts when it was just an idea in the mind of its founder, Tessa Ransford. As a practising poet, and having recently set up the School of Poets in Edinburgh, she felt that a much greater audience for poetry existed than was apparent, but without a central forum there was no way for people to express their interest – poetry needed a place of its own. During the Edinburgh Festival in 1981, the Poetry Society from London had a stall in the Assembly Rooms; it was there that Tessa Ransford overheard an American voice asking 'Where is the poetry library in Edinburgh?'

A library! It seemed to be the obvious answer. Tessa was aware that few public libraries could afford to cover more than the obvious giants of 20th century poetry, and that publishers had little financial incentive to publish

<sup>1</sup> John Purser



The aims  
of the  
SCOTTISH POETRY LIBRARY  
ASSOCIATION

1

To establish the Scottish Poetry Library, a library that would contain a complete collection of Scots, Gaelic and English poetry written in Scotland, and in addition, a collection of twentieth century English, Welsh and Irish poetry, and a selection of critical and biographical works relevant to the rest of the collection, all Scottish literary magazines and a selection of recordings and other material.

2

To make the Library freely accessible to the public and to provide a lending service, including lending by post.

3

To establish the Library as a centre for poetry readings, 'meet the author' sessions, seminars and meetings, and social events intended to promote the writing, reading and appreciation of poetry in Scotland.

4

To provide a 'shop window' and order-point for the purchase of books, especially to promote small press poetry publications.'

or promote it. A poetry library could be the missing centre, both a resource of written works and a channel for the enthusiasm to read and write poetry; a place to house the written and encourage the spoken form.

At that time there was much more institutional support for poetry in England: the Arts Council Poetry Library had been open since 1953, there was the Poetry Society (founded in 1909), a National Poetry Centre and the Poetry Book Society. Tessa did some research to support her idea, visiting the Poetry Library in London, the library of poetry at Harvard, and the Northern Poetry Library in Morpeth. She put together a feasibility study, then

submitted a first application to the Scottish Arts Council, which was turned down. In March 1982 the Scottish Library Association's newsletter carried an article by Tessa Ransford about her concept of this special library; she then consulted with academics, librarians, businessmen and poets, and a steering committee was formed. They drew up a leaflet proposing 'a Poetry Library for Scotland', and called upon the public to support the project by joining the nascent Scottish Poetry Library Association. The

project had the support of prominent poets such as Norman MacCaig and Sorley MacLean, and of bodies such as the Scottish Civic Trust, Poetry Ireland, the Scots Language Society, and the leaflet carried an impressive list of signatories of poets and those active in the literary world.

The Inaugural meeting of the SPLA was held immediately after Norman MacCaig's Sydney Goodsir Smith Memorial Lecture at Edinburgh University on 23 November 1982, and most of those at the lecture stayed on for the meeting. By January 1983, membership of the Association numbered 200.

After months of determined investigation and preparation by Tessa and the SPLA Committee, four applications to the Scottish Arts Council and negotiations with the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, by October 1983 there were grants in place of almost £20,000 to establish a library. That the SPL should be sited in Edinburgh was never a foregone conclusion, but the availability of suitable premises in historic Tweeddale Court, off the High Street, led to the happy fact of the library's being set up in the former packing-room of Oliver & Boyd, publishers of Scottish poetry from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century.

On the night of 23 January 1984, 300 people fought their way through a blizzard to attend the opening party at St Cecilia's Hall, to hear Naomi Mitchison, Sorley MacLean and Norman MacCaig – the Honorary Presidents – read, and to try the now famous vegetarian haggis, created for that occasion. On 6 February, the premises in Tweeddale Court opened for

business, with rug and desk and electric heater, and four shelves of donated books to make up the stock, all under the benign gaze of a bust of the poet Helen Cruickshank. Donations, then as now, were vital to the life of the Library.

Tessa Ransford had been appointed Director, and she was joined by Tom Hubbard as the first Librarian. Both posts were part-time; the two shared the desk, the salary, and the same zeal for establishing the new-born library as a thriving entity that would both encourage and serve the art of poetry in Scotland.

Everything that happened in the first few years of the library's existence was a step on the way towards achieving that aim, and set a pattern for activities and functions which has in fact changed little over 25 years. In March lending began; in April the first newsletter, *SPLASH*, was distributed; lending by post started in July; the Library entered the Festival cavalcade in August (with a decorated, borrowed milk-float) and put on a week of readings as part of the Fringe, followed by a ceilidh every night in the North British Hotel. The tiny library was visited by Lord Gowrie, Minister for the Arts, and then by Miroslav Holub, the great Czech poet – who famously wished there were somewhere like it in Prague.

In the first year about 3000 people visited the library, and well over 1000 books were borrowed. Workshops, readings and school visits had taken place. The dream had become reality. At the first birthday event

Eddie McGuire and the Whistlebinkies played, and then it was heads down for the second, and following, years of struggle and celebrations.

In 1985 Tweeddale Court was still a building site, with demolition and restoration continuing around the library, and scaffolding at the entrance to the close undoubtedly deterring visitors. But the work of the SPL reached out: in June six Scottish poets gave a series of readings at six universities in Germany, supported by the British Council. That summer the SPL began its participation in the Edinburgh International Festival, hosting a reading (jointly organised by the SPLA and *Verse* magazine) by French poet Michel Deguy, with Sorley MacLean. This 'Auld Alliance' event set the course, followed through the next 25 years, of true internationalism, with poets of standing invited from abroad to come and read, their work often translated into Scots and Scottish Gaelic, and read in those languages too.

The library in Edinburgh has always been considered only the *headquarters* for a nation-wide institution of poetry, and in each period of the library's history this intention has been fulfilled in the ways and means available at the time. Lending books by post began almost as soon as the library opened; a brave thing for a small specialised library with very limited bookstock to do. Not only sending books, but *taking* them to readers was also tried, though the first hiring of the Gaelic Books Council van in 1986 for a tour of the North-East left the Library sadly out of pocket. Nothing daunted, and still determined to develop contacts with the regions, the library hired the van again for a trip to the Borders

and Dumfries and Galloway the following year, visiting twelve schools, 'one technical college, two public libraries, two village communities, two writers' groups and the Buddhist monastery at Eskdalemuir.' The interest engendered by the van visits confirmed that a travelling van was a necessary, rather than just desirable, adjunct to the physical headquarters in Edinburgh. In November 1988, after much negotiation, the SPL took possession of its own van, a 'time-expired' Post Office bus, donated by the Postal Board. Tessa Ransford took on the role of driver and managed twenty or more trips a year, with a cargo of sample book, magazine and audio stock, visiting Sabhal Mhor Ostaig, Dundee College of Art, Glenalmond School, to name only a few destinations.

Placing small collections of SPL books in other libraries was another way of making poetry available to readers not able to get to Edinburgh. The first 'branch' opened in the library of the Adult Education Department of Glasgow University in 1988, and was soon followed by shelves of books in Dundee and Lerwick. Over the years collections have been set up in over fifteen locations, not all of them libraries – the one in the Ceilidh Place in Ullapool has been especially well-loved – and not all of them permanent.

Within a few years it appeared that the SPL was achieving what it set out to do; statistics showed that visitors to the library and number of books borrowed steadily increased. But hidden beneath the surface was the constant struggle to get and maintain funding. Though Scottish Brewers covenanted money in 1985, at the same time the funding from the

*Ní h-ór, ní h-ionmhus eile,  
do ghéibha uaim d' áiridhe,  
ní cána no comha cruidh,  
acht rogha ar ndána dheacruigh.*



*It is not gold or other treasure  
that you will get from me in special;  
it is not tribute, nor gift of cattle,  
but the choicest of our hard-wrought poems.*



*It isna gowd or ither treisurs  
Argyle in special wins frae me,  
I gie nae nowt as youissless fairins  
But braw poems alane for ye.*

Gulbenkian Foundation was halved, and this balancing of support from one source or another has continued throughout the library's history. Events, tours, and the van visits were only achieved with the financial aid of different bodies. The Director in her report in November 1985 says the SPL is working well 'thanks to numerous volunteers', and it was true – a small army of people shared the single room and its new calor gas heaters, helping to keep the library open to the public six days a week.

Most of the £20,000 required to buy the premises at the beginning of 1986 had to be borrowed, burdening the SPLA with a crippling bridging loan. In May Nigel Tranter fronted a major appeal, writing that though he was no poet, he recognised that poetry could represent the soul of a nation, and that the least the non-poets could do 'is to cherish and sustain our heritage of the singing, seeking, sighing world.' In his report to the AGM in November that year, the Secretary and Finance Convenor, William Wolfe, pointed out that since the SPL was performing a public service, it was reasonable to use public funds, but that it was also 'reasonable to expect private support... from those who recognise the essential place of the art of poetry in civilised society.'

It was becoming apparent that the premises on the ground floor in Tweeddale Court were too small to support the work it was hoped to undertake. In 1988 the flat above the library came on to the market, and though financially a great leap of faith, it was an opportunity too good to miss. The plan was to use the upstairs for storage, a quiet reading

area, and a place where visiting poets could stay, but before any of that could happen, the flat had first to be let, as the rent would provide much needed financial support. A combined housewarming and 5th anniversary party was held in February 1989, graced by the Honorary Presidents – and with a £10 entry fee. *Scotland on Sunday* wrote that the SPL, having reached its fifth birthday, 'flourishes despite defying the normal rules of financial husbandry', and concluded that 'so far the Muse, or love of it, has provided.'

In the first few years it was largely goodwill which provided the books: staff and friends scoured second-hand booksellers for appropriate items, authors and publishers gave multiple copies of new works. With this generosity plus a limited budget, in the first 18 months of existence the library acquired some 4000 items – books, magazines and tapes – and by 1989 the stock had expanded to properly fill the library area.

The best collection of books is nothing without a catalogue, and the SPL has evolved a catalogue that is meticulous in construction and unique in its ability to provide a subject approach to poetry. INSPIRE was first developed as an in-house catalogue by the then Assistant Librarian Penny Duce, and Gordon Dunsire, then of Napier University. In the late 1980s several professional librarians had given some time voluntarily to help create the first catalogue, and to knock into shape a tailor-made subject classification scheme. Cataloguing of the collection started in earnest in 1987, when the entries were recorded on typed slips in sheaf binders, and

published in book form in January 1988 (with support from the Post Office, who sent a postman with a book-shaped cake to celebrate!). In 1989 work started on INSPIRE, and it was finally launched with a public demonstration in June 1991. The feature which makes INSPIRE unique is its ability to give a close indication of the themes of the poetry contained in each book – very useful for the thematic approach often required by schools, museums and galleries, and the media.

These changing methods of working and the associated increase in people inhabiting the building – including a new part-time administrator – demanded more space; in April 1991 tenancy of the upstairs flat ceased, and with a sigh of relief the library was able to expand physically for the first time in its seven years. The cataloguing computer was installed upstairs in the hall; the light and airy sitting room became a Members' reading room, and the bedroom was eventually used as just that, when the flat became a residence for visiting poets. The SPL was at last able to fulfil the long-held ambition to bring poets from abroad for a prolonged stay, to give readings, workshops, and of course, to write. Through 1992 and 1993 four Poets in Residence – from Iceland, Singapore, India and Botswana – visited for over a month each.

In 1992 the SPL was awarded a grant by the Scottish Library and Information Council to produce an index to Scottish literary magazines published since 1952. Twenty titles were originally covered, with printed volumes being produced for most of them, and the index entries, for

all the poetry and related articles, were incorporated in INSPIRE. Add to that the file of cuttings, accumulated from newspapers and magazines from the 1970s and earlier, and it will be apparent that the library was succeeding in establishing itself as a central resource for biographical, bibliographical, critical and background information on Scottish and international poetry.

By the summer of 1993, a fieldworker was taken on for van visits, targeting community centres, libraries, hospitals and prisons as well as schools. A new van was sponsored by Foundation for Sport and the Arts and eventually achieved an average of 8 visits a month.

On the library's 10th birthday in January 1994 Catherine Lockerbie wrote in *The Scotsman* that what the SPL had achieved was 'real and tangible and good.' And so it was, but by that date the SPL had already turned an important corner in its development, and was looking down a road leading to even greater things.

In 1993 the Scottish Arts Council had undertaken an in-depth review of the SPL, and was very positive about the Library's achievements and future, with the proviso that more space was absolutely crucial. It is in the nature of libraries to grow, and the SPL, being much more than just a repository of books, had more need for space than most libraries – it needed breathing space for the art of poetry.

The following year the National Lottery for the Arts offered Capital Funding grants. The process of application was started in August 1994 and a submission was made in June 1995. A feasibility study had been produced by Malcolm Fraser Architects, with a design for a proposed new building; the SPL became the client for Plot J in the Holyrood Project North Site, an old brewing area. The advent of the Scottish Parliament nearby was not yet a gleam in anyone's eye: 'poets are always right in the van/of whatever invigorates mortal man', as Morgan wrote for emblazoning on the SPL's van.

In September 1995 a grant totalling £506,301 was awarded, on condition that the SPL raised 25 per cent matching funds – about £120,000. Once again the SPL launched into a fund-raising campaign, with a television appeal featuring Tom Leonard and Jimmie Macgregor, but it was disappointing to discover that though love of poetry abounds, willingness to support it financially does not. Despite a few welcome donations and further funding from the Lottery, it was accepted that the SPL had no option but to borrow from the bank on the security of the existing property.

A ceremony to lay the Foundation Stone of the new building was held on 1 August 1997. The stone is carved with the Canongate crest and Virgilian motto: 'Sic Itur Ad Astra' – 'thus will you go to the stars'. Honorary Presidents George Bruce and Iain Crichton Smith attended, and Edwin Morgan read from his own translation of 'Altus Prosator', by St Columba, a poem fourteen centuries old.

Through 1997 and 1998 as the building began to take shape there was no let up in the Committee's search for funding, as normal running costs of the SPL had to be met as well. In July 1998, on Tessa's 60th birthday, the postman delivered a cheque for £60,000 from the Michael Marks Charitable Trust. Perhaps The Muse was providing again.

The new building had to provide for the practicalities of library accommodation – shelving for the books, office space, computer workstations, garaging for the van – but Malcolm Fraser's design was an award-winning lesson in fitting the new and practical into an historic context. It is a graceful structure of glass and wood that uses light and space to create a welcoming place for poetry, its writers and readers: intimate but not intimidating, with hidden places amongst the shelves where people can connect with the written word in private, as well as open areas where poetry can come alive in performance.

Artists were commissioned to breathe even more life into the building. The approach to the front door is over a carpet of carved oak leaves, the front window bears a verse from a 17th century poem by a Gaelic bard, rendered in the three languages of the nation, and inside, ceiling windows allow light to filter down onto a glass balustrade etched with phrases from the landscape poetry of Scotland, and the phrase from Iain Crichton Smith's sonnet that heads this account: 'this house, this poem, this fresh hypothesis...'

The premises in Tweeddale Court were sold, the books were packed into boxes for their short journey down the Royal Mile, and in March 1999 staff bade farewell to the old library, then set about the huge task of setting up shop in the new building. A happy Open Day was held in April, with old friends and new visitors streaming in; a time capsule was buried in the forecourt; there were new poems, a blessing, dancing – and of course Macsween’s haggis. The official opening followed in June, with constituency MP Alistair Darling as guest of honour, and Honorary Presidents George Bruce and Derick Thomson reading poetry.

In the bright new building and with a new hand at the helm – Dr Robyn Marsack took over at the beginning of 2000 after Tessa Ransford retired – the SPL entered the new century hopefully.

The first achievement in the second millennium was the launch of *The Jewel Box*, a CD recording the voices of almost 40 contemporary Scottish poets, a copy of which was given to every secondary school in the country.

Later in 2000 the old in-house catalogue, INSPIRE, was migrated onto the internet, now hosted by the Centre for Digital Library Research at Strathclyde University. Its migration online was managed first by the Librarian Penny Duce and then by her successor, Iain Young; Gordon Dunsire continues to play an essential advisory role. No one in 1984 could have imagined the ease with which users in Shetland or the Borders could

The eighties were the decade in which everything was given a price and much that was priceless was not valued... It seems ironic, or perhaps coincidental, that an infant like the Scottish Poetry Library should have arrived at such a time. Yet it was neither. It is, after all, in the nature of poetry to aim for the ideal... and nurture the best aspects of humankind.

James Robertson, *Scotland on Sunday*, 1999



find out whether there was poetry about heroism or climate change or first kisses available for loan from a library in the Royal Mile.

Cataloguing, carried out with MARC21, remains a very labour-intensive procedure, and the work of the librarians is still augmented by the efforts of several long-term professional volunteers. It was noted in 1987 that many, if not most, of the academic enquirers were from Europe and North America, a bias even more noticeable when the catalogue went online, which proved invaluable to those studying Scottish literature at a remove. The ease and speed of scanning and email allowing for immediate response, the SPL can provide an efficient information service for both home and abroad.

The Library's early involvement with European poetry conferences and exchanges gave a foundation for later expansion when funding was sought and won, at the turn of the century, for EPIC, the European Poetry Information Centre. After an initial acquisition of some 600 books, Europe remains an area of strength in the bookstock, mirrored by information about European poets, and the development of strong links with European poetry organisations.

From about 2003 the work and the reach of the SPL has increased at least fourfold, with events, projects, and partnerships too numerous to name. Steps were made on the way to opening out the SPL to new users when New Opportunities Funding was granted to improve the website, and a

new look was developed, featuring a poem of the month on the home page, as well as a country-wide events listing service, and substantial Scottish poetry information resources.

Coming from a publishing background, Robyn could not resist the opportunity to initiate books when funding allowed. With a variety of publishing partners, the SPL has produced a number of anthologies that show the extraordinary range of Scottish poets' talents: writing about those great occasions in life for which only poetry has the words; translating from several European languages in bilingual editions of contemporary poetry, and from the Gaelic; responding to exhibits in the Royal College of Surgeons museum; and providing new poems for a landmark anthology of poems for children by contemporary Scottish poets, which won a prestigious award for the UK's best children's poetry book of 2006. Thus the SPL plays its part in nurturing the work and reputation of Scotland's poets, in a richly productive literary period.

Education Officers were appointed to organise education provision both within and furth of Edinburgh; in 2005 alone the SPL was involved with 90 poetry projects outside the capital city (which meant that over 1000 children from eight different regions took part in workshops and performances). The three-year Poetry and Architecture competition, run in conjunction with RIAS, did much to raise the SPL's profile in the education community, an achievement which has been built upon by the programme of Continuing Professional Development offered to teachers. Although the

van has gone, by working with a team of talented poets the SPL provides more extensive workshop sessions in many parts of the country, including the Highlands and Islands, remote parts of Argyll and Galloway, and the multi-ethnic schools of Glasgow.

Appointment of an Audience Development Officer alongside a part-time Marketing Officer enabled the SPL to be involved in a far greater range of events, from posters on the Glasgow subway (and New York's; possibly on trams in Kolkata!) to the Wigtown Poetry Competition, from Random Acts of Poetry on National Poetry Day in 2005 to romantic Valentine's Day parties down Crichton's Close.

Under the guidance of successive Librarians the bookstock has quickly grown to fill all of the handsome oak shelves, and in the new building, expansion has been downwards: MFA converted one half of the basement into office space, and in the other half Neil Simpson has created an elegant home for the important Edwin Morgan Archive, officially opened in April 2009 on the poet's 89th birthday. Julie Johnstone is both Curator of the Archive and the SPL's fourth Librarian, inaugurating the successful series of annual fairs that bring hundreds of visitors to the SPL on an autumn Saturday.

With a steady incoming of books following a thoughtful acquisitions policy, and a regular programme of events in place, in the last two years attention has turned towards using the marvellous collection to inspire the love of poetry by encouraging the reading of it. Three-year funding from

the Paul Hamlyn Foundation in 2006 for more active outreach has allowed the SPL to work with partners in the regions and public libraries, getting whole new populations of people to read, experience, and respond to poetry. Book groups of different types have become popular in the library itself, and there is a section of the website dedicated to readers' groups and discussion forums; the website, in fact, has taken on a life of its own, and as well as being a source of online poetry, events information, and support for aspiring writers, is now the medium for e-newsletters, one specially designed for librarians. In 2007 the average monthly figure for website visits was 37,000.

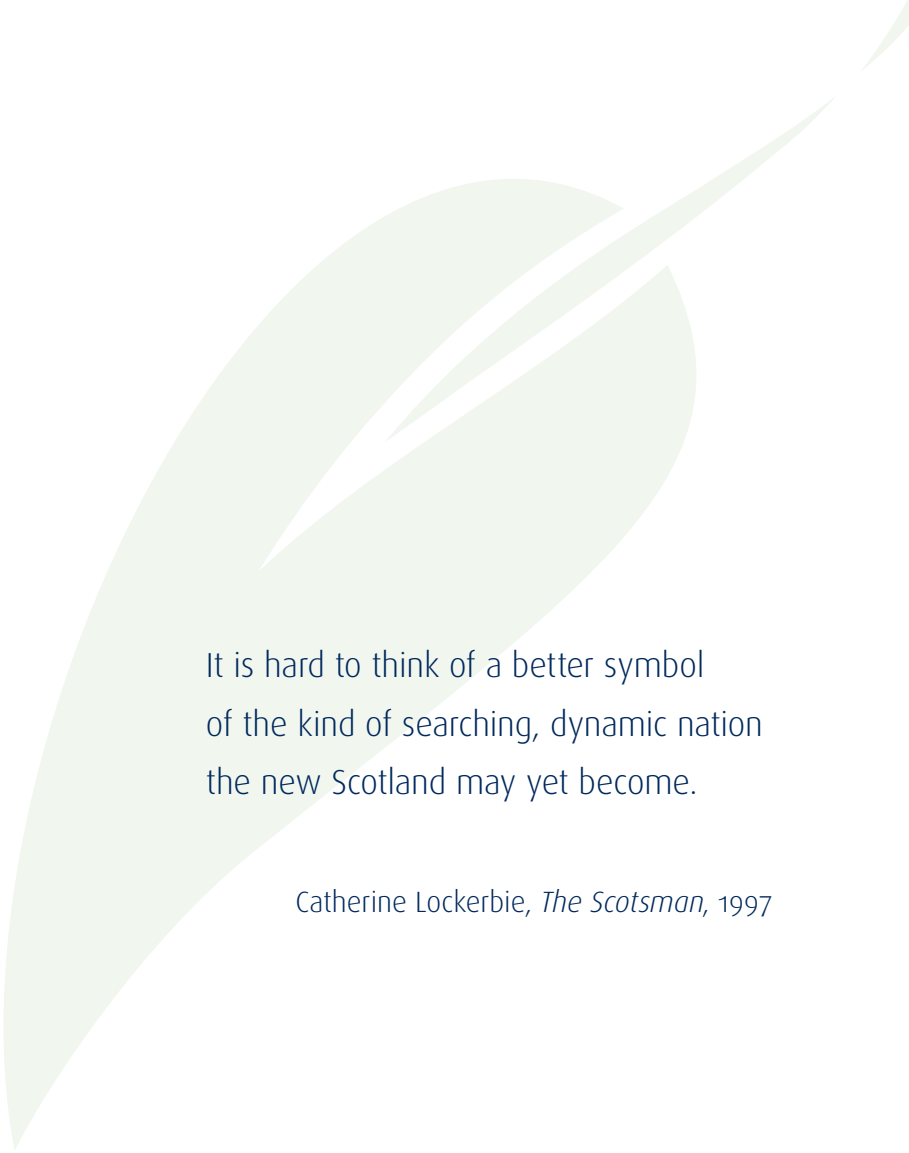
There are now about 35,000 items in stock, and 15 small collections located in different parts of the country. There is even a little collection in the neighbouring coffee shop. In 2007 the number of visitors to the building in Crichton's Close was 7,800, and the number of books borrowed in the year totalled almost 4000.

Although the SPL has remained amazingly close to the original stated aims of the organisation, the scope of activity within those aims has widened to a degree perhaps unimaginable in 1984. It has established itself as an institution of national and international status. It remains true that the library's funding is not assured, that much work remains to be done, that half of the staff are still part-time, that space has once more become a challenge. But as this brief history makes plain, the SPL is no stranger to such a position.

Amidst the uncertainties, some things remain constant. As Emily Dickinson writes:

There is no Frigate like a book  
To take us Lands away  
Nor any Coursers like a Page  
Of prancing Poetry ---  
This Traverse may the poorest take  
Without oppress of Toll---  
How frugal is the Chariot  
That bears the Human soul.

The SPL remains toll-free to its users, and tries to be frugal in its practice but prodigal in other things; in the time its staff – paid and unpaid – devote to their work, for example, and in its expenditure of imagination in the service of poetry. The page as courser is also – as we are reminded in Patrick Geddes’s words each time we step across the Library’s threshold – the leaf by which we live. Between leaf and star, the Scottish Poetry Library sets its course for the next twenty-five years, and beyond.



It is hard to think of a better symbol  
of the kind of searching, dynamic nation  
the new Scotland may yet become.

Catherine Lockerbie, *The Scotsman*, 1997

