

## **SCOTTISH POETRY LIBRARY: AGM 2021**

### **Report from the Director**

In this exceptional year, the SPL responded to the pandemic restrictions with agility to quickly and effectively adapt our operations to maintain our lending services, support staff home-working, commission new digital content and to deliver events and workshops through online platforms.

Our immediate priority was the health and welfare of our staff, volunteers, and service users. Thereafter, it was to establish home-working policies and procedures to enable remote working. Staff were provided with a working from home survey (CIPD) and a desk risk assessment form (HSE) to help identify IT equipment and office resource needs for flexible working. The SPL's operational budget was revised to reflect this shift in our working practice.

We furloughed on the Job Retention Scheme (JRS) those staff whose work was primarily focussed on engaging with customers and collections in the building. The surplus presented in the accounts this year was largely a result of the JRS. The Board agreed to transfer the vast majority this surplus to the 2021/2022 budget for sustaining our projects and activities programme, as well as to cover increased cleaning costs.

During this period, the Board approved professional development sabbaticals for the Learning & Engagement Co-ordinator to the Lyceum Theatre, and the Events & Volunteers Manager to the National Library of Scotland.

All items on loan when the library closed in mid-March were renewed automatically for three months to prevent overdue notices being sent out to customers. We introduced a free postal loan service, which grew in popularity throughout the year. We will likely sustain this service offer whatever the future holds.

Along with home-working adaptations, our revised budget also recognised the need to invest in digital platforms to enable key learning and engagement activity, including workshops with a mothers' writing group and a teachers' poetry group delivered online by staff and freelance facilitators.

Our new Poetry Ambassadors initiative was launched in 2020. The ambassadors - Hugh McMillan, Aiofe Lyall, Ceitidh Campbell (Scottish Gaelic) and Thomas Clarke (Scots Leid) - commissioned 20 new poems. The overarching theme of the commission was 'vision', the topic of National Poetry Day. In addition to these new works, we commissioned 20 new works from poets reflecting on how they were coping with the first phases of lockdown, and the impact of isolation and social distancing. These poems were themed and presented as From the Front Lines.

These 40 new commissions helped us to support freelance writers during a time of uncertainty over their future earnings, prior to the introduction of the Government's support schemes for self-employed people, managed by Creative Scotland and the Royal Society of Authors.

We were also invited by cultural commentator Gerry Hassan to partner on new poetry commissions for his book Scotland: After the Virus. Gerry selected work by six poets, including writers in Shetland Scots (Christie Williamson) and Scottish Gaelic (Anne Frater).

We produced Poetry in Quarantine, a weekly a round-up of poetry-related content reflecting on the pandemic, along with the '#PoemsForCarers' Twitter campaign to highlight writing in support of healthcare workers.

From September 2020, we have resourced a Long-Covid writing workshop, with participants drawn from a support group on Facebook. This became one of our three-pillars of health and wellbeing activity for our online workshops programme in 2021/22. We partnered on this programme with Lapidus Scotland and mindfulness practitioner Colin Maguire. We commissioned researcher Ruth Stevenson to produce an evaluation of the impact of the programme on the participants. Ruth's report was presented to the Board in November 2021.

Our Head Librarian was a facilitator for the development of the pilot sector skills project run by NHS Scotland, the Scottish Government and The Alliance. The workshop themes related to health literacy and creative words for wellbeing. This activity will be offered to library and third sector staff to give them the skills needed to help service users who want to find health information in the library or use creative writing to improve their wellbeing.

The SPL's Director delivered a presentation on the Words for Wellbeing Mapping Project (May 2019 to April 2020) at Scottish Libraries and Information Council's AGM in November 2020.

In addition to our core programme, we worked with the Scottish Government's Winter Festival programme on the production of films featuring poetry and poets, for example a Pass the Mic activity presented by BBC Scotland's Vic Galloway and featuring poets and musicians, including Victoria McNulty, Kevin Gilday and Courtney Stoddard.

New recordings of Burns favourites Rantin Rovin Robin, read by Len Pennie, and Tae A Haggis, read by Alistair Heather, were produced for Scotland's official Burns Night celebration in Dublin. The library also hosted the filming of Cabinet Secretary Michael Russell's introduction to Scotland's new Bilateral Agreement with Ireland. We recorded a film with poet Iona Lee that was screened on line by Ireland's Government for their St Bridgit's day festivities.

In support of our commitment to Scots language, we commissioned films with James Robertson and Sheena Blackhall selecting and reading their favourite children's poetry written in Scots. These were made available via our schools resources webpages.

Our film commissions also included A Tour of the Scottish Poetry Library for Book Week Scotland with poets Janette Ayachi, RJ Arkhipov and Louise Peterkin. We also produced A Scottish Gaelic Tour of the Scottish Poetry Library with Martin MacIntryre, Dolina MacIennan and Marcas Mac an Tuairneir.

We recorded a special in conversation activity with poets John Hegley and Michael Pedersen. The film, Bard File Bardd, was launched in September 2020 with readings by Peter Mackay, Ciara Ni E and Ifor ap Flynn, the Welsh Laureate.

Our Events and Volunteers Manager was seconded one day a week to support the programming for Edinburgh's new poetry festival, Push the Boat Out. The festival took place in October 2021 based at Summerhall, with Edinburgh-wide pop-up events. This was the first major urban poetry festival in Scotland for over 30 years. Our Learning and Engagement Co-ordinator was a cultural advisor on the Edwin Morgan Second Life project fund.

We invited Sheena Blackhall to facilitate one of our Nothing but the Poem reader development workshops. Sheena had been a regular participant in the sessions that were tailored for our Friends members during lockdown. We plan to invite more poets to be guest facilitators.

In October 2020, we announced publisher, editor and writer Joy Hendy as the first recipient of the SPL's Outstanding Contribution to Poetry in Scotland award.

Our guest editors for Best Scottish Poems (2020) were Janette Ayachi (selecting 20 poems in English), Thomas Clark (two poems in Scots) and Ceitidh Campbell (two poems in Scottish Gaelic).

We asked the public to recommend poets for addition to our online guide to Scottish poets. This resulted in 35 individual poets being nominated, with 13 being selected with the help of our Poetry Ambassadors.

During the year, our Projects Manager led on the production of a new publication in our Tools of Trade series. The book, *To Mind Your Life*, was gifted to graduated Nurses and Midwives in 2021. Sponsors included Queen's Nursing Institute Scotland, Royal College of Midwives, and The Medical and Dental Defence Union of Scotland.

When lockdown lifted, we presented art exhibitions by Jules Bradbury and Ian Hamilton Finlay, the latter in support of Edinburgh City Arts Centre's summer showpiece exhibition on Finlay.

The Edinburgh Park development published a book for new residents and businesses focusing on their new art commissions, including elements of a long poem that will be displayed on buildings and references to poets and poetry in new street names. The book referred to the 12 poets' sculptures that are on public display that were commissioned for the first major development at Edinburgh Park.

Our Assistant Librarian joined the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals in Scotland (CILIPS) Board of Trustees, and she was also appointed as secretary to the UK-wide CILIP LGBT network committee. As a member of the CILIP equalities working group, the Assistant Librarian supported a consultation to set up a national disability and neuro-divergent group. The Assistant Librarian also had two articles focusing on equalities-themed library work published in the Information Professional journal.

We completed the stocktake of all the books and pamphlets in collection. Our next step was to amend the records on the library catalogue. We then relocated the books to create a new arrangement of Lending books on the ground floor, and a collections of Reference/Special Collection books on the mezzanine floor.

General weeding (removal) of old and grubby books from the shelves resulted in a significant number of withdrawals. We have set up an arrangement with Better World Books, a not-for-profit social enterprise that collects and sells books online to fund literacy initiatives worldwide.

Melina Gutierrez Hansen, a post-graduate research student from Queen Margaret University, produced a report on the public's attitude to online and in-person events. We also hosted two student placements, Fiona Wilson and Rejoice Moloadi, from the University of Strathclyde Library & Information Services' undergraduate degree course.

We updated the catalogue records for cassettes and reels which will form part of an audio archive for the Unlocking our Sound Heritage project working with National Library of Scotland for digitising and loading our audio catalogue onto the British Library's database. The nationwide digital sounds archive project was completed in November 2021. We plan to spotlight a dozen or so of the 'sound treasures' from the collection that we submitted.