

SCOTTISH POETRY LIBRARY: AGM 2022

Report from the Director

During the financial year to March 2022, the poetry library continued to adapt to the constraints and opportunities that arose from two lengthy periods of closure during the pandemic. Our focus continued to be on the wellbeing of our staff, service users and community of artists and freelance practitioners. We further adapted and improved our online offer and digital resources through commissioning technical expertise and by observing and learning from the approaches of other arts organisations in presenting workshops, events and content made accessible on websites and social media platforms.

The library building was open to the public from July through to December 2021, and our free postal borrowing service was made available to borrowers throughout the year. Staff who had been part-furloughed returned to full-time work by September.

Our first significant in-person event was in August with the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon to announce Kathleen Jamie as Scotland's new National Makar. The tenure of the Makar role was reduced from five to three years to lighten the load and present more opportunities for poets to be considered for future Makarships.

We supported the Makar to reach out to the public for submissions for a nature-themed collective poem to tie-in with COP26 Climate Change Summit, which was held in Glasgow in November 2021. Jamie curated three poems under the title *The Life-breath Songs*, which was produced as a triptych of film poems by artist Alastair Cook. We also supported the Makar with a public call-out for submissions to *A Poem Letter from Scotland to Ukraine*, which was entitled *Our Waking Breath*. Jamie participated in a virtual event on nature writing that highlighted Burns' love for the environment. The event included readings and conversation with Joséphine Bacon, an Inuit writer from Quebec.

We worked with Visit Scotland to record the Makar's contribution to the launch of *Scotland's Year of Stories* initiative, which was launched in December 2021. For the Year we partnered with Art-in-Healthcare to place poets in four healthcare settings across Scotland. The poets were Helen Boden, Jane McKie, Vicki Husband and Aoife Lyall. The SPL was invited to join the Year of Stories (2022) Working Group.

We sponsored a poetry event in the official COP26 Green Zone with poets Peter Mackay, Donald S. Murray and Roseanne Watt exploring the impact of climate change on Scotland's islands.

We commissioned three new works by Black women writers that were premiered at the Africa in Motion film festival in October 2021. The poets are responding to the embodied experience of Blackness and being in the environment, the changing climate, and the need for communion with nature as a means of healing and resistance. The poets were Clementine E. Burnley, Tjawangwa Dema and Zakia Carpenter-Hall. We also sponsored two opportunities for Black writers based in Scotland to join the Obsidian Foundation's poets' residency programme.

During lockdown, we commissioned events and activities that we were able to video and post on our website and social media platforms. These included a celebration of football for the men's football Euro Finals in June 2021 with the participation of poets Kevin Williamson, Victoria McNulty, Jim Mackintosh, Julie McNeill, Erin Boyle and Thomas Clark.

Our hybrid events programme included the *Beyond the Swelkie* celebration of the centenary of George Mackay Brown; Poetry London's 100 issue tour; the Polari Prize showcase of LGBT writers; Laura Fyfe, Helen Boden and John Boland presented by Red Squirrel Press; and readings with Fiona Sampson, John Hegley and Brian Holton.

Solely online events included New Writing Scotland 39 edition launch and Palestinian poet Doreen Tatour presented by Drunk Muse Press.

In October 2021, we partnered with Capability Scotland on a new sensory-poetry activity for disabled young people attending Stanmore House School in South Lanarkshire. The creative practitioners involved were poet Leyla Josephine and storyteller Daniel Serridge. The artists shared their experiences in a special podcast that is available on our website. Capability Scotland also commissioned Ellen Renton to write a poem to celebrate their 75th anniversary. In May 2022, we shared the outcomes of the project with policy makers, politicians and cultural sector organisations at a showcase event in Edinburgh. We will take the lessons learnt from this project as we develop our relationship with Capability Scotland to deliver in more of their learning and care settings.

We once again partnered with the Saltire Literary Awards for the Callum Macdonald Memorial Award, which was present in November to publisher Hugh Bryden (Roncadora Press) and poet Donald S. Murray for *Achanalt*. Staff and Board members participated on the selection panels of major literary prize, including Scottish Book Trust's New Scottish Writer Awards, Saltire Best Scottish Poetry Book, and Saltire Best Scottish Publisher. We also sponsored the Gaelic Poetry Book Prize (The Derick Thomson Prize), which was awarded to *100 Favourite Gaelic Poems*, edited by Peter Mackay & Jo MacDonald, and published by Luath Press.

Our work supporting Gaelic culture included a multi-disciplinary film *Spirit of Place (Spiorad an àite)*, funded by Bord na Gaidhlig to commemorate the 1500th anniversary of St Columba's birth. The film, curated by Jean Cameron, involved poets Niall O'Gallagher, Deborah Moffatt, Afraic Mac Aodha and Eòghan Stewart along with musicians, dancers and visual artists from Ireland and Scotland. We also partnered with the Gaelic Books Council to celebrate the centenary of Derick Thomson (Ruaraidh MhicThòmais) with a film recording of reading and conversation with Anna Frater, Meg Bateman and Petra Poncarová.

For National Poetry Day in October, Hollie McNish presented the SPL with three exclusive recordings from Queens Theatre in Edinburgh on her national *SLUG* book tour.

For Burns Night, we commissioned new poems and a film recording by poets Morag Anderson, Janette Ayachi, Victoria McNulty and Susi Briggs. This activity received a lot of

press coverage on account of the poets challenging the myth of Burns the man, highlighting the treatment of women in his life and writing.

Our creative writing and reader development workshops continued online. These included supporting a Long Covid writers' group, a mothers' group, a teachers' group and mindfulness classis. These activities were facilitated by Lesley MacNiven, Ruth Gilchrist, Jenny Lindsay and Colin McGuire. We also partnered with the literature and wellbeing charity Lapidus to deliver online workshops and readings. The writers included Alec Finlay, Hannah Lavery, John Glenday, Liz Niven, Martin MacIntyre, Naomi Shihab Nye and Pam Beasant.

An independent evaluation of our health and wellbeing programme showed that almost all (96%) of the attenders agreed that they enjoyed the sessions, and 90% agreed that their group was a safe space and that they could be themselves in their group. A highly positive 88% agreed that they felt supported within the group. Additionally, of those that attended the longer-term Mindfulness and Long Covid courses, 94% agreed that they felt a sense of progression across the sessions.

We paired five young people from across Scotland with poet mentors. The young poets were Caitlin Sherret, Lydia McMillan, Mattea Gernentz, Elissa Hunter-Dorans and Rhys Pearce.

The pairings participated in three online meetings with the a showcase event taking palce at the Dandelion Festival in Inverness in September 2022. We also helped with the promotion of submissions to the new Roddy Lumsden Memorial Mentorship programme, managed by Niall Campbell.

We further invested in the Poetry Ambassadors programme and helped to establish the City Makars Network. The poets involved were Sheena Blackhall, Martin MacIntyre, Tom Murray, Martin Malone, W. N. Herbert, Jim Carruth, Alan Spence, Hannah Lavery, Niall O'Gallagher and Laura Fyfe.

Our long-term aim is to support peer learning and the development of more localised activity and commissions by writers across Scotland writing in English, Scots and Scottish Gaelic. In 2021, our Poetry Ambassadors commissioned 20 new poems for the 250th anniversary of the birth of Sir Walter Scott. Our ambassadors led on the selection of poets from public submissions to be added to our online guide to Scottish poets. They also chose Sally Evans as the recipient for the Outstanding Contribution to Poetry in Scotland award, which was presented at a special event in Sally's honour held at the poetry library in May 2022.

Our guest editors for Best Scottish Poems 2021 were Hugh McMillan (English), Martin MacIntyre (Scottish Gaelic) and Sheena Blackhall (Scots). SPL staff and volunteers supported the selection of the long list for the English language category.

In November 2021, we received from the National Library of Scotland a collection of 300 digitised audio files recorded from our tapes and reels. We plan to platform and showcase historic poetry treasures from this archive.

We were a partner in the development of pilot activity for the Information for Wellbeing initiative led by NHS Scotland and Scottish Libraries and Information Council. Our Head Librarian was a facilitator for the programme's Words for Wellbeing workshop. Online training will be rolled out to library and third sector staff across Scotland.

We sponsored the inaugural the Push the Boat Out festival, which took place at Summerhall in Edinburgh in October 2021. Our events and projects staff were seconded for one day a week to support the festival's programme planning. We also sponsored the participation of Scottish poets in the European Poetry Festival in London in June 2021. These writers were Juana Adcock, Colin Herd and Christie Williamson.

We launched two editions of our Tool of the Trade publications series. *To Learn the Future* (ed 2) was gifted 1,000 graduating teachers in Scotland, and *To Mind Your Life* was gifted to 3,000 graduating nurses and midwives. The publications were produced with the financial sponsorship of respective professional bodies and unions, including Educational Institute Scotland, The General teaching Council for Scotland, AHDS, The Royal College of Midwives, The Queen's Nursing Institute Scotland and the Medical and Dental Defence Union of Scotland

Our exhibitions programme included works from our collection by Ian Hamilton Finlay to help promote a major retrospective at the City Arts Centre in Edinburgh; *Stone Moon*, a collaboration between artist Alison Grant and poet and writer Fiona Sampson; *Fair Winds and Following Seas*, a celebration of the work of Leonard McDermid and his press Stichill Marigold; and the work of Barbara A. Morton.

In March 2022, we supported the programming and launch of the Museum of Literature Ireland's Literary Cities initiative. Scottish poets taking part include Kathleen Jamie, Donald S. Murray, Leyla Josephine and Victoria McNulty.

Former National Makar Liz Lochhead and crime writer Sir Ian Rankin were filmed in the library for BBC 2's Inside Culture for a special feature on our collection of book sculptures. This episode was broadcast in October 2021.

With regards to our collections, we weeded older stock and either archived the rarer copies or donated them to Better World Books, a charity supporting literacy initiatives in developing countries. We relocated the reference section to the Mezzanine rolling stack and incorporated many of the pamphlets on our general lending books shelves.

We continued to support placements from Strathclyde University's libraries and information management course. We established new relationships with Children in Scotland and Scottish Chamber Orchestra for accessing our building and engaging with our collections and staff expertise. We also organised tours with groups supported by City of Edinburgh Council's Adult Learners service.

We will miss former colleagues Hannah Lavery (learning and engagement) and Beth Cochrane (events and volunteering), both of whom took up new opportunities following the career development sabbaticals that were taken up during the pandemic. Our long-serving Communications Manager Colin Waters left to take up a marketing role for a homeless charity. We wish them all well with their careers.

We would like to acknowledge and thank the contribution of the following volunteers and placements: Netta Colasante, Anna Forbes , Gabriela Arroyo, Mhairi Addison, Abbey Matthews, Aimee Harper, Ben Thom, Bryony Pillath, Cameron Fraser, Catriona Forbes, David Wylie, Ian Kirkland, Iona Mackenzie, Ishbelle Bee, Jacqueline Whymark, Jess Cave, Karla O'Connor , Kitty Clapperton, Marcus Smith, Matías Galleguillos Muñoz, Melissa English, Molly Mccracken, Moyra Pearston, Neil James Rhind, Patrycja Respondek, Rejoice Molaodi, Stephanie Staub, Marieke van Asselt, Emma Sunter and Ceda Parkinson.