

## HIGHLAND LIT AGM CHAIR'S REPORT 03.01.22

2021 was another challenging year for everyone, each in their own way. I suspect no-one has been unaffected by the ongoing pandemic. The latest wave of the Omicron variant, while reportedly less severe in terms of health impacts, is nevertheless rampant and the ensuing potential for harm has yet again put our best laid plans in jeopardy, not least the postponement of our annual Christmas dinner and open mic session in December. But despite these issues, HighlandLIT has persevered, and in some respects thrived especially in terms of our Zoom meetings and events.

Infrastructure has been an essential part of our progress and under the skilful guidance of Committee members Scott Fraser and Cathy Carr has resulted in the ability to carry out hybrid events where members can meet physically or join via Zoom.

Following last year's AGM when some longstanding and hardworking members stepped down from the Committee to take a break, a number of new Committee members joined, and our numbers swelled to nine. This has proved very helpful in that there is more flexibility when 'life happens' and there is always someone able and willing to step in to take the reins.

We very quickly coalesced into a strong and willing team, the more seasoned members guiding us newbies and assisting us to handle the tasks associated with running HighlandLIT. Our focus has always been to keep the monthly events active, and a tremendous amount of work has been carried out by all members but especially the Programme co-ordinators Liz MacRae Shaw, Scott Fraser, Sharon Gunason and Penelope Hamilton, who have approached our various guest speakers, invited them to present insights into their work via the mediums of author events and workshops.

In April Committee member Liz Macrae Shaw spoke about her latest book 'Had we never loved so blindly'. In May we had a poetry workshop with poet, author and force of nature George Gunn who told us to look out of the window and write about what we see. July's author event saw another 'force du jour' Barbara Henderson whose book 'Scottish By Inclination' records both Barbara's own story and her interviews a number of people from Europe who have made Scotland their home and have had to deal with the challenges around the Brexit issue. October brought an exciting evening with Seoras MacPherson who talked about his life of storytelling as a Seannachie, and memorably told tales both traditional and more modern.

In addition, we had our regular tri-monthly open-mic sessions, held via Zoom: these events always give us a wide and varied insight into the thinking and writing of HighlandLIT members in poetry and prose. And of course we held a Writing Competition in conjunction with Book Week Scotland, and received 28 entries. These were read through by Committee members Mo MacQuarrie, Sharon Gunason and Liz MacRae Shaw who created the shortlist. Shortlisted items were then read and the winners selected by author, poet, songwriter and musician Bob Pegg who presented the prizes at our hybrid event in November at the Glen Mhor hotel. The winners read their pieces either in person or via Zoom.

The Committee has been very busy in recent months scheduling the twelve events for 2022: a great year of stimulating events awaits HighlandLIT's members and friends.

To assist our core objective of promoting the work of the members and the written and spoken word, good use of Zoom and PA equipment has been important. As a result, we have purchased new PA equipment and invested in social media to permit our connectivity while separated by Covid constraints. These are one-off costs which help us function successfully.

Covid, and its numerous variants still plague our lives and as such it is likely that we may have to deliver events by Zoom only for the foreseeable future. But we have found that while Zoom is not as good as physical face to face association it still allows us to hear great work by our members and by other authors. The benefit has been that we are now reaching a wider geographic audience and that suits our core objectives nicely.

A further, and most immediate challenge is that of succession. It is inevitable that Committee members will need to step down as their personal circumstances dictate and we are sad that Trish Salt is stepping back from her role as HighlandLIT treasurer. She has done a fantastic job for a number of years. In addition, Cathy Carr who very capably prepares the flyers that adorn our website is very busy with her involvement in the Scottish Glass Society with an international event looming, so she too will be stepping down. We shall very much miss their extremely valuable input, but at the same time thank them for their considerable efforts, skills and of course their time and energy.

As a result, we would very much encourage HighlandLIT members, and those wishing to become members to ask whether they could volunteer to join the Committee and devote a little time helping steer HighlandLIT through the coming months. In particular, we have urgent need for someone to take on the role of treasurer. If you would like to volunteer, please let me know as soon as possible.

It therefore leaves me to thank the Committee once more for their hard work this year. You have carried it out with energy, good humour and skill, which has resulted in a very positive outcome under difficult circumstances. I also would like to thank all sixty-three members for your continued support, and trust that you will renew your membership once more for 2022-23 and join us as we celebrate the world of literature.

Mark Williams

(Chair)