

FROM THE DIRECTOR

I'm glad we're beginning the year by opening out onto landscapes in these pages.

It's counter-intuitive, perhaps, in the depths of winter, when we hunker down and, after the brief expansiveness of Christmas and New Year, return – in the northern hemisphere – to defending ourselves against the elements. But this is the song the Library is singing, hopes to sing, in 2013: of opened windows, opened doors; of reflection and inspiration within and beyond the walls of our building. Taking our threshold words seriously, as Jennifer suggests: by leaves we live.

We can't promise to be everywhere, but we want to be the means by which poetry gets everywhere, in some form. We love books – our faith in libraries has been stoked and restored by the anonymous gifts we were given in 2011 and shared in 2012, and by the response those called forth – so we'll never give up on collecting, caring for and lending books of poems. Beyond the books, though, is the reach of the website, of social media, and of the sound of poetry. A trust has given us an unexpected grant which means that National Poetry Day this year will definitely be audio-enhanced. A volunteer has been working steadily to convert some of our fragile audio holdings into a format that we can broadcast (thank you, James!). And through the generosity of our



Lochan: photo by Juliet Wood

world's poetry into Scotland and sent the world's voices back out again; our 'Living Voices' project in partnership with the Scottish Storytelling Centre got

p.7– here I want to say what a great ambassador for poetry and the SPL she has been, and how much we'll miss her. (Although she will be participating in the 'Living Voices' project, which will make full use of her gifts of knowledge, performance and empathy.) We will be looking for someone to take this work forward at a national level.

So 2013, which once seemed to feature as a quiet interval before 2014 –with all its celebrations and commemorations – will in fact be a year packed with activity, not least here at Crichton's Close, where we need to make space for the books and sounds of the next 10 years. We'll be keeping you up to date with that process, asking for your support, hoping that you want to be companions on the way. Christian Wiman asks, 'who knows by what unconscious routes poetry is reaching into lives that seem to have nothing to do with it?' For those who consciously seek, the SPL hopes to provide both clear routes and some byways. And for those not seeking, we hope that they'll nevertheless find and be touched by some of the poetry we'll be sending out this year.

Robyn Marsack
Director

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Friends and supporters, we're going to be out and about in Scottish botanic gardens in 2013, walking and talking poetry.

Last year was marked by grand projects for the SPL: the new website was launched; 'The Written World' in partnership with the BBC brought the

off to a fine start under Emma Faragher's management; and we toured and brought home the 'GiftED' exhibition. Besides that, we did all the things we usually do, and that includes great work in education, managed as it has been for the last nine years by Lorna Irvine. She talks about some of the highlights on

STOP PRESS: THE SPL BIG GIVE CHRISTMAS CHALLENGE

Thank you!

We are so grateful to our Friends, supporters, and anonymous donors for enabling us to reach our target of £4,000 in the online Big Give Christmas Challenge. We don't usually bombard you with solicitations and entreaties, but for our first attempt at an online fundraising campaign, we wanted to make sure that we got the message out. And we did!

When you think of a library, you think of bricks and mortar, or in our case, wood and glass. But like poetry itself, the SPL reaches parts where you wouldn't expect to find it. In 2013, the Year of Natural Scotland, you will find the SPL in all manner of places, and your donations have made that possible.

READING MATTERS

Alastair McIntosh, poet, academic and activist on his essential reading matter



What was the last poem you pressed on a friend, with a manic gleam in your eye?

In November *The Big Issue* phoned up and asked me to write about Ash Dieback. I said that if a tree species goes, a whole culture withers, but ended with a manic gleam in my eye thanks to using Alice Walker's poem, 'Torture': 'When they torture you too bad to talk - plant a tree.' And when they cut down the forest, 'Start another.'

If poems were food, name one fancy Heston Blumenthal-style starter, one hearty breakfast favourite and one guilty after-pub snack.

What's a Heston Blumenthal? I don't do celebrity starters. When asked about 'dietary requirements,' I say, 'I'll eat anything *horrible and Hebridean*.' For starters... I've been working with one of Derick Thomson's two poems called 'An Tobar' ('The Well'). It's about taking an old woman a drink of the clear cold well 'that makes whole every hurt'. I'll have my hearty breakfast with MacDiarmid; 'On a Raised Beach' is in my opinion Scotland's greatest metaphysical (or spiritual) poem. As for a guilty after-pub snack, I remember at Aberdeen University we'd stagger off the slopes of Glenshee and sally home to rounds of 'The Ball of Kirriemuir'. But sadly, as Deadeye Dick in another raunchy favourite forewarned, in time 'a man grows old...' These days my choice must be therefore more upstanding. How about *The Song of Solomon*? And in the Canongate edition with A.S. Byatt's intro to the King James version. Ah, 'taste and see,' sayeth the Psalmist!

What's in your current reading pile, warts and all? (List the pulp fiction and the gardening catalogues too...)

Last night it was David Daiches' Gifford Lectures from 1983, *God and the Poets*. Next is John Gittings' *The Glorious Art of Peace: from the Iliad to Iraq*. I heard him last August at the Edinburgh International Book Festival. He says that historically the narrative of war has smothered that of peace. If you go right back to Homer and Euripides you'll find startling insights into war's roots and consequences today. Finally, I look forward to seeing Tessa Ransford's new collection from that valiant little publisher, Luath Press. It's called *don't mention this to anyone*, and links to her years in Pakistan and India. I was thinking about Tessa, and how she's helped so many of us, when I was giving a lecture recently at Saint-Cyr in Brittany – the French equivalent of Sandhurst. I was putting the case for nonviolence and my host was a military specialist on Iran. He said that the west will never understand that region until it overcomes postmodern nihilism, and rediscovers its deadened capacity to understand poetry. In Persia, he said, the political is poetical. So you see, we are talking here of poetry, not as a luxury (as Audre Lorde so very well pointed out), but as a basis for communication that is pivotal to future world peace.

And finally, you already have Shakespeare and the Bible on the desert island. You can keep one poem and one luxury. What'll they be?

In my view T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* marginally trumps MacDiarmid as the greatest spiritual poem in the English language. It's just hoaching with faerie, Vedanta and the exploding love of Christ that is the fire of England's rose – the England that could be and should be – the England that we, of a manic MacDiarmid hue, would desire to have as our neighbour. And for luxury, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, written in 1955, the year of my birth, and not forgetting to include the 'Footnote to Howl' with its prelude, 'Holy, holy, holy... the world is holy,' and I need quote no further.

Alastair McIntosh is the author of Soil and Soul (Aurum Press), Hell and High Water (Birlinn), and Love and Revolution (Luath Press).