

HIGHLANDLIT – AGM REPORT – 16 March 2021

This has been a challenging year for HighlandLIT. Due to the current Coronavirus pandemic and ongoing lockdown (with a brief remission into tiers before Christmas), we have had to change the way we deliver our events and activities by switching to an online platform. We have risen to these challenges and continue to host successful author evenings, workshops and open mics. An additional challenge of the last few months has been that several key committee members have chosen to stand down. This has led to a number of vacancies that we hope to fill during this AGM in order to remain quorate and continue the efficient running of HighlandLIT.

The year began with what was (and maybe will be again) our usual venue at the Glen Mhor – Charlie Gracie joined us in January to discuss his published poetry and recent novel and Merryn Glover hosted an intriguing and productive workshop in February that focused on ‘hands and feet’ as a means of generating ideas and writing. Events in March were cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic. Helen Sedgwick – who was due to host the book launch for her crime novel – *When the Dead Come Calling* – generously agreed to record an introduction and readings from her work for the cancelled April event as well as a brief interview with the Chair of HighlandLIT. These were posted on our new Vimeo channel.

We decided to resume our schedule for the year by running events via Zoom. - a solution which had both pros and cons. On the one hand, online events seemed to offer a vital way of bringing people together during the pandemic and creating a sense of solidarity and connection. Running sessions online also opened up further opportunities for people who would normally be unable join us in Inverness due to physical distance – we not only had attendees from more distant parts of the Highlands but also from overseas. Nevertheless, there were (and are) many that feel Zoom is a rather poor substitute for face-to-face sessions, with less spontaneity and limited social interaction. Nevertheless, for good and for bad, we had little choice in the matter, and rather than abandoning our programme, we chose to use the Zoom platform as a new opportunity rather than a hindrance to our organisation.

The variety and quality of readings, workshops and open mics was impressive given the circumstances. We had readings and Q&As from the poet and novelist, James Andrew; the young-adult novelist, Laura Guthrie (with some interesting discussion of the representation of people with autism in fiction); the local architect Calum MacLean (who discussed his lushly photographed and expertly researched book on the Architecture of Inverness); and Graham Bullen (who provided some excellent readings and an overview of the historical research that went into his novel, *The Quarant*, set in Renaissance Venice). Aoife Lyall, in what seemed a

timely manner, ran a workshop on how we might utilise aspects of our homes as a stimulus for creative writing and Cathy McSparran provided a particularly inspiring and supportive workshop on 'good beginnings'. Our popular open mic events continue to attract a wide and varied audience. This year, these included a joint event with Edinburgh Literary Salon entitled 'Bridging the Gap' which brought together voices from HighlandLit and those of our near neighbours in the Lothian area. Unfortunately, we had to cancel the Waterstones book club as to move this online would have been impracticable and time consuming; it may be possible to resume the Book Club when and if the pandemic is effectively over.

We continue to maintain a strong presence in Social Media via our website plus our Facebook and Twitter accounts. Attendance at events is consistently high and, encouragingly, membership has increased this year, thereby suggesting HighlandLIT continues to attract people (even in the midst of global and local uncertainty and stress). Finances remain buoyant; online events have meant some reduction in expenses (room bookings etc.) but have also meant less income thereby making it as important as it was last year that we access new sources of funding and elect a committed fundraiser. Electing a new committee for this year has been an ongoing concern so we devised a questionnaire in order to find out from our members: 1, whether it was worth continuing HighlandLIT; 2, whether we should go into hiatus for a year; or 3, whether should we continue with online events and resume face-to face when possible. Encouragingly, a large percentage of respondents opted for the third option. The questionnaire also asked members whether they would be interested in joining the committee and, thus far, we have had some positive responses from members who we hope will be able to run for the vacant roles.

Earlier this year, Jayne Austen, chose to stand down from her position as joint secretary. Jayne put a huge amount of work into publicising HighlandLIT evenings, liaising with writers and exploring fundraising opportunities. Drew Hillier is also standing down from his role as publicity co-ordinator. It is worth reiterating that Drew has provided a vast amount of work and commitment in ensuring the success of HighlandLIT over the last four years and his considerable expertise in editing, publicity and events co-ordination has been invaluable. Malcolm Timperley – who, as programme co-ordinator, has effectively liaised with our authors to ensure the smooth running of events is also standing down this year. Catherine Carr has chosen to stand down as secretary but is still happy to help with publicity fliers and posters, for which we are hugely grateful. I will also, as Chair, be standing down from the committee this year. It remains to thank John Dempster (Publicity Co-ordinator) and Patricia Salt (Treasurer), who will be standing once again for the committee this year. John, who oversees our web page

and Facebook account, has continued to provide excellent write ups in our blog and newsletter. Trish has also been invaluable over the years not only for her acumen when it comes to HighlandLIT's finances but with the additional work and commitment she has put towards fundraising.

My decision to step down as Chair and event host has not been an easy one. However, work commitments at UHI continue to increase incrementally, not to mention the challenges and additional workload involved in delivering online learning programmes from one's living room. Over the years, I have put a great deal of emotional investment in HighlandLIT and have been keen to contribute to its success and ability to reach a wide audience of people who live in the Highlands who love books, are occasional scribblers, have ambitions towards writing as a vocation, or are successful published authors. It has been a pleasure to serve HighlandIT and oversee its development as an organisation that not only seeks to promote author events and the written word but to facilitate a varied programme that is inclusive, supportive, encouraging and, above all, inspiring.

Paul Shanks
(Chair)