

The Edinburgh Makar 2002 - 2005 - Stewart Conn

City of Edinburgh Council

2 June 2005

Purpose of report

- 1 To inform the Council of the success of the post of the Edinburgh Makar, and to acknowledge Stewart Conn's achievements as the first incumbent.

Main report

- 2 At its meeting on 28 August 2001, the Council Executive approved the proposal to institute the post of the Edinburgh Makar, a 'poet laureate for Edinburgh'. It was intended that the chosen poet hold the post for a fixed period of three years, in return for an honorarium.
- 3 The post built on the City Council's existing commitment to the promotion of writers and literary projects through, for example, the Writers' Museum, Makars' Court, literary publications, the Festival of Scottish Writing, etc.
- 4 The Scots word 'Makar' originally applied to the writers of the 15th century but has come to be used to stress the role of the poet or author as a skilled and versatile worker in the craft of writing.
- 5 Following a detailed selection process, the poet and playwright Stewart Conn was appointed as the City's first Edinburgh Makar by the City Council on 30 May 2002, taking up his post on 1 June 2002. Stewart Conn has worked hard to promote poetry in Edinburgh during his period of Makar, and he is to be commended for his enthusiasm and commitment. He has been involved in many projects across the Council, with other city-based organisations and beyond. These include:
 - Co-editing an anthology of poems for children and their parents, *Goldfish Suppers*, with Nancy Somerville of the Family Learning Unit and published by the Education Department.

- Selecting a set of Edinburgh-related *poem-posters* for display on Lothian Transport buses, produced in collaboration between the Council and the Scottish Poetry Library.
 - Working with the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh on plans for its Quincentenary celebrations, resulting in an anthology of commissioned poems, *The Hand that Sees*, based on objects in the College Museum.
 - Publishing a new collection of poems, *Ghosts at Cockrow* (2005), including poems written as Edinburgh Makar, and featuring a central sequence, *Roull of Corstorphine*, directly inspired by his role as Makar.
 - Contributing to the city's successful bid to become the first UNESCO City of Literature.
- 6 Stewart Conn completed his three-year tenure as Edinburgh Makar on 31 May 2005. A detailed report on his term, and a Calendar of Events, are appended: *I remain profoundly grateful to the Council for creating the post; and proud and honoured to have been the first officially to fill it. My tenure has proved hugely rewarding, invigorating and illuminating. I trust the next incumbent finds it likewise.* [Stewart Conn, 15 March 2005]
- 7 The Edinburgh Makar is appointed in acknowledgement of his/her achievements in poetry. An honorarium of £1000 per year for three years is awarded.

Recommendation

- 8 It is recommended that the City Council commends Stewart Conn for his enthusiasm and commitment to the post of Edinburgh Makar.



Herbert Coutts
Director of Culture and Leisure

26:5:05

Appendices	Report by Stewart Conn, the first Edinburgh Makar 2002-2005, and Calendar of events/appearances as Makar.
Contact/tel	Elaine Greig, 0131 529 4064
Wards affected	City-wide
Background Papers	Report to the Executive of the Council, 28 August 2001 Report to the Full Council, 30 May 2002

THE EDINBURGH MAKAR : RÉSUMÉ 2002-2005

During my spell as Makar various patterns emerged, bringing their own challenges, opportunities and satisfactions. An initial spell of acclimatisation led in turn to a consolidation period, with positive responses to a number of proposals, and productive activities involving myself and others, both in and outside the Council. Latterly a range of ideas rewardingly bore fruit, and give signs of doing so further.

The attached Calendar, or breakdown of events, will indicate the scale of activities in which I was either directly involved as Makar, or into which it was possible to channel an Edinburgh content; thereby fulfilling as best I could, in the public domain, my brief which was *to heighten the profile of poetry within the city ... and reciprocally that of the city, in poetry.*

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Within the Council, projects included co-judging the Social Work Department Schools Writing Competition; the Education Section of the Department of the Environment's decision to include writing in their schools anti-litter campaign; the City Libraries Festival of Scottish Writing; and, for Museums and Arts, preparing a dossier of poems for the Edinburgh Monuments Exhibition in the City Art Centre, which led to a well-attended walk-about event in the City Art Centre, performed by Valerie Gillies, Gael Turnbull and myself (poets) with Christine Kydd (singer).

The City Art Centre also happily saw the launch of the Education Department Family Learning Unit's imaginative anthology of poems for children and their parents, *Goldfish Suppers*, which I was invited to co-edit with Nancy Somerville. This was a joy to work on, with a follow-up event at the 2004 *Edinburgh International Book Festival* – where I also structured an 'Edinburgh, City of Literature' event with Sheena McDonald, Candia McWilliam, Donald Smith, Gavin Wallace and singer Rod Paterson.

In collaboration between the CEC and the Scottish Poetry Library, a set of Edinburgh-related *poem-posters* was produced and displayed on *LT buses*. The poems were by Burns and Scott, Nancy Macintyre (from *An Intimate City*), Matthew Fitt (*Goldfish Suppers*), and Firhill School pupils (in the SPL's *Poet Makar Bard*).

A continuing involvement has been with *Makars' Court*. I was asked to give an address at the Autumn 2002 unveiling to Neil Gunn (a special pleasure, as he had been a personal friend), Neil Munro and John Galt (with whom as an Ayrshireman, I also had sympathies). Keen to see the balance redressed, I initiated a Stromness-based appeal to commemorate George Mackay Brown, which I'm delighted to hear has borne fruit: I believe his presence should meet with wide approval.

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Beyond this, my tenure has been marked by requests to give talks/addresses to organisations ranging from the Royal Museum of Scotland, the Robert Louis Stevenson Club and the Muriel Spark Society to the inaugural Pitlochry Writing Week-end. As for my poetry, I was relieved at being under no onus to produce 'civic' verse. At the same time I was asked to write poems for specific 'public' occasions. The first, commissioned by Whiteburn Projects to celebrate the regeneration of the Holywood North site and now in situ, comprises couplets laser-cut into the pavement in front of the Clocktower.

I was thrilled that three distinctive occasions, each of which I was asked to mark with a poem, should have fallen within my period of tenure:

- Edinburgh's World City of Literature presentation to UNESCO, in Paris
- the unveiling of David Annand's sprightly statue of Robert Fergusson in the Canongate
- the Scottish Poetry Library's 21st birthday celebrations.

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The first outside approach on my appointment was from the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, wondering whether poetry might play a part in their *Quincentenary* celebrations, beginning in July 2005. Out of this grew a collaboration between the College and the Scottish Poetry Library: an anthology of 20 commissioned poems, based on objects in the College Museum, and drawing on the College's motto for its title, *The Hand that Sees*. The volume is due out this summer, with an event planned for this year's Book Festival.

Also due to appear during the Book Festival is, I gather, a selection of autobiographical essays edited by Paul Henderson Scott for the Saltire Society. For this he commissioned me to write a piece on the current climate of Edinburgh poetry, and more particularly my experiences as Makar.

I've also been invited to read from my new collection *Ghosts at Cockcrow*, published by Bloodaxe and launched at StAnza 2005. In it and among those poems written during the past three years, are a number set in Edinburgh. A central sequence posits *Roull of Corstorphin*, elegised in Dunbar's '*Lament for the Makars*', as the capital's first poet. It is extremely unlikely that this would have been written but for my spell as Makar, of which I see it as a direct and grateful acknowledgement. [*see 2004-05 Diary]

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To sum up, it is important that the Edinburgh Makar is not so much a figurehead but someone who is a good ambassador for the city - all the more vital in the present cultural climate and given the City of Literature connection - and is respected as someone supportive of other writers. The post is a laureateship, not a writer's residency... And what is being sought is, ideally, a voice to represent Edinburgh - a city of many disparate voices.

It meant everything to me that I was not a 'political' choice - but that of my peers. I'd also strongly urge a brief as free as my own, with the new Makar encouraged to put up proposals - then given the freedom and backing to pursue these. I remain profoundly grateful to the Council for creating the post; and proud and honoured to have been the first officially to fill it. My tenure has proved hugely rewarding, invigorating and illuminating. I trust the next incumbent finds it likewise.

Stewart Conn, Edinburgh
5 May 05

**Makar's Calendar 2002-03:
Specific events/appearances as Makar:**

May 24 th	<u>Makars' Court</u> : Press Photo-Call announcing appointment
July 16 th	<u>City Chambers/European Room</u> : Inaugural address & poem
Aug 8 th	<u>National Library of Scotland</u> : a welcome, on behalf of the City, to Prof. David McCordick of Wisconsin University, ed. 'Scottish Literature in the 20 th Century Anthology', on its launch by Scottish Cultural Press
Aug 13 th	<u>Scottish Poetry Library</u> : Edinburgh Festival event: " <i>Selected Works</i> " (from the SPL's collection) – in conversation with Ken Cockburn
Aug 19 th	<u>Edinburgh International Book Festival</u> reading – introduced as Makar
Oct 9 th	<u>Makars' Court</u> : introduce unveiling of plaques to Galt/Munro/Gunn – talk subsequently printed in <i>Saltire Society Newsletter</i>
Oct 10 th	<u>Writers' Museum</u> : National Poetry Day/Hugh Miller bicentenary reading
Nov 18 th	<u>City Chambers</u> : speak for judges of CEC Social Work Dept's Children's Poetry Competition – intro to winners published in <i>Green Shoots</i>
Jan 23 rd	<u>Scottish National Portrait Gallery</u> : talk on and toast to Rbts Burns and Fergusson, with special reference to the Nasmyth portraits of Burns
Feb 13 th	Charity reading for McQueen Trust for Lone Parents: on Edinburgh poetry
Mar 1 st	<u>The Hub</u> : WEA Scotland centenary celebrations – on Edinburgh poetry
Mar 6 th	<u>National Museum of Scotland</u> : a contribution to their 2002-2003 Lecture Series: ' <i>Dichotomous City: Edinburgh in Poetry down the Ages</i> '
Mar 12 th	<u>Netherbow Arts Centre</u> : Poetry Association of Scotland – " <i>2 Laureates</i> " reading, with Edwin Morgan
May 8 th	<u>St Andrew's & St George's</u> Christian Aid sale... appearance as Makar
May 21 st	<u>Newington Library</u> : illustrated talk/reading on Edinburgh poetry : part of Edinburgh City Libraries' Festival of Scottish Writing.

At other events such as readings at the Edinburgh Book Festival, my tenancy of the post is obviously mentioned, with aspects of the capital and its poetic inheritance woven in as part of the content.

Makar's Calendar 2003-04

June 29 th	RSAMD, Glasgow : on judging panel for inaugural Edwin Morgan Poetry Competition
Aug 7 th	talk/reading to Univ of California students on Edinburgh Poetry down the ages
Aug 13 th	Edinburgh International Book Festival reading & Imprisoned Poets event [Aug: run of stage play <i>The Burning</i> , performed by Theatre Alba, at Duddingston]
Aug 23 rd	Dept of Social Work Schools Writing Comp : took part in prizegiving at Book Festival
Sep 16 th	Makar meeting with Director of Culture and Leisure et al
Oct 14 th	Whiteburn Projects : poem commission (to celebrate regeneration of Holyrood N. site)
Nov 1 st	Saltire Society : talk on my role as Makar (Lord Provost responded to toast to the city)
Nov 9 th	Edinburgh Poetry Club : illustrated talk on Edinburgh poetry
Nov 15 th	RLS Club : 'The Shadow of the Child' – a talk on the poetry of Robert Louis Stevenson (text subsequently printed by the RLS Society)
[Dec 3 rd	meeting to set up Myeloma Foundation Poetry Competition]
[Dec 4 th	one of many meetings re setting up CEC poem-poster project]

Jan 17th **City Art Centre:** walk-about event to tie in with the Monuments Exhibition – with poets Valerie Gillies and Gael Turnbull, and singer Christine Dick

Feb 12th **City Chambers:** brief address, as Makar, prior to meeting of the Council

Feb 27th **CEC:** prize-giving for Dept of the Environment anti-litter comp

Mar 25th **Clocktower site:** poem unveiled (Whiteburn Projects/Holyrood Road North regeneration)

Mar 26th **RSAMD, Glasgow:** on judging panel for Edwin Morgan Poetry Competition

May 15th ff **'Poetry on the Move':** presence of set of 5 poem-posters in LT buses (to coincide with CEC Libraries' Festival of Scottish Writing)

May 25th **NLS/Causewayside Library:** take part in Scottish-Polish music and poetry event [as part of Edinburgh City Libraries Festival of Scottish Literature] (and contribute to Polish issue of CEC publication *Green Shoots*)

May 29th **ASLS Annual Conference:** talk as Makar on The Health of Edinburgh Poetry Today

Makar's Calendar 2004-2005

June 3rd Mauchline/Poosie Nancy's – address as Makar on *Burns and Edinburgh*

June 25th **SPL:** as judge, present prizes to winners of **Myeloma Foundation** poetry competition

July 7th CAC: launch of **Goldfish Suppers** poetry anthology for children (co-editor)

Aug 18th Edinburgh International Book Festival: **Goldfish Suppers** event

Aug 21st Edinburgh International Book Festival: take part in **City of Literature** event (Edinburgh laureates down the ages)

October *The Scots Magazine:* interview by James Gracie, on being the Edinburgh Makar

Oct 6th Ottakar's (George Street): judge/Poetry Competition prize-giving

Oct 13th **UNESCO, Paris:** attend highly successful City of Lit bid... specially written poem *Emissaries*

Oct 17th **Canongate Church:** unveiling of Robert Fergusson statue: read poem

Nov 5-9th attended **Zagreb Poetry Festival**, as Makar: reading/talk on Edinburgh poetry

Nov 22nd MacDonald Rd Library: talk on Edinburgh poetry

Jan 28th **Pitlochry Literary Weekend** talk: "Edinburgh as a source and inspiration for my poetry"

Jan 30th **Muriel Spark Society** talk: "Authors' Ghosts: Muriel Spark the Poet"

Feb 4th **Scottish Poetry Library** 21st birthday event: specially written poem *Flight of Fancy*

Feb 24th Publication date of new collection of poems *Ghosts at Cockcrow*/on **BBC RS arts prog**

March ... Record commissioned poets and compile miniCD insert to **RCSEd** anthology

Mar 20/21st **StAnza:** St Andrews Poetry Festival: reading & official launch of **Ghosts at Cockcrow**

Mar 22nd Again judge Mary Erskine School writing competition, in role of Makar

Apr 18th Record interview and poems, touching on my Makar role and on 'crossing borders', for a Scottish PEN CD presenting 12 Scottish writers, and due to be launched at the PEN International Congress in Berlin, in June 2006

May 5th A recital (and first public airing) of the **Roull of Corstorphin** sequence, with musical punctuation by John Sampson, in the National Library of Scotland

May 20th Final Makar appearance: with travel writer Louisa Waugh and Chilean singer Carlos Arredondo, for Edinburgh University's Department of Lifelong Learning. The total proceeds of the event go to Scottish PEN