

Title of the Book: *Declarations on Freedom for Writers and Readers*

Preface by T. M. Devine, Publisher: ScottishPEN, Edinburgh, Scotland Street Press, April 2020, ISBN: 978-1-910895-42-9, Price: £9.99.

*Liz Niven*

Plans to celebrate the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Declaration of Arbroath in 2020 were expansive and extensive but, due to the global pandemic, those best laid plans were unable to materialise. Scotland, the home of the Arbroath Declaration, fortunately had some plans which would not be affected by the pandemic. The publication of *Declarations on Freedom for Writers and Readers* is both a timeous and note-worthy achievement. In the midst of isolations and restrictions, the written word has remained free.

Published by Scottish PEN, the Scottish branch of PEN's international movement, dedicated to writers' freedom of expression, it's a fitting celebration of the fourteenth century document. Written to Pope John XXII in Rome, the document sought his intervention to prevent Scotland falling under English rule. The King of England, 'ought to be satisfied with what belongs to him', and implores that they 'leave us Scots in peace'. This most non-aggressive approach to Independence allows us to appreciate the desire for 'the sovereignty of the Scottish people and independence from English overlordship', as Mario Relich points out in his polemic on Alasdair Gray's writings about the Declaration. This cross-referencing of others views adds to the multifaceted approaches in many of the contributions.

In Tom Devine's Preface, the importance of the Declaration is emphasised in several 20<sup>th</sup> century quotations. As Professor Michael Lynch attests, it is 'The most celebrated document in Scottish history'. Placed on UNESCO's Memory of the World register, it's recognised as of global importance. The Declaration is printed in full in the preface, followed by a scholarly bibliography should readers wish more.

Appropriately, this anthology is no inward looking collection of poems and prose focussing on Scotland alone. The locations visited range across the globe from Sri Lanka to South Africa, India to Thailand, Israel to Ireland. The content too ranges from the historically based Kirsten MacQuarrie's depiction of the cruel imprisonment of Countess MacDuff at Berwick, to contemporary concerns – such as Anne Murray's focus on Faslane, the controversial site of nuclear deterrents.

Three winners were chosen from the submissions and all three poems bring contemporary issues under the spotlight. Donald Adamson, in a rich Scots language considers the work of Greta Thunberg, is 'wunner in whit Freedom will be wirth/gin airth's like a brakenjaur'. Similarly, Elspeth Brown makes an impassioned plea that 'the pen be mightier than plastic

particles and carbon waste'. Refreshing, current and demonstrating the document's legacy, the writers take the Declaration and reveal to the reader how it inspires them.

The third winner, Jock Stein, in 'Tones of Destiny', a nod to the famous Stone of Destiny on which previous Kings of Scotland were crowned, uses his poem as a mantra wish list. Each line begins 'I want' and ranges through historical times with reference to St. Andrew, Columba, to famous people such as James Clerk Maxwell, Hume and Haining to the present day, 'I want a Government who know the time / for referenda and for prayer'. Using his poem to reference the many famous Scots throughout history, he leaves a powerful litany of names to recall or research further.

Helen Boden, in 'A declaration of hush', also tackles climate change and ecological issues and particularly noise pollution. 'Let's see on-the-spot penalties for idling engines', or, 'private one-sided arguments on public transport'.

Charlie Gracie in 'Asylum seeker accommodation survey, Glasgow', vividly portrays the banality of gathering statistics about 'pots and pans', or 'what they think of the housing', while the residents such as Karim, 'lifts the tail of his shirt', to show the 'glisten of scars'.

It is refreshing to see some experimental, less traditional form in James Robertson's concrete piece which plays with page layout. It's inspired by Alasdair Gray's famous statement, inspired by Canadian writer Denis Lee's words that we should, 'work as if you were living in the early days of a better nation'. The inclusion of letters from Scottish writers to seven writers under threat is an unexpected welcome addition. Initially written to mark the 2019 Day of the Imprisoned Writer, they provide a frank, powerful and often deeply distressing picture of the remarkable difficulties experienced by writers across the globe. The eloquent contribution from Jane Archer, writing to David Coleman MP for Immigration in Australia, is on behalf of Iranian-Kurdish journalist Behrouz Boochani with an apt reminder that the MPs own ancestors were once immigrants. Zoe Wicomb writes to Shakthika Sathkumara, an imprisoned Sri Lankan writer, censored and imprisoned for writing about homosexuality. Ricky Monahan Brown writes to the Mexican journalist, Lydia Cacho, constantly harassed and attacked for her exposure of corruption and abuse to the extent that she has now left her native land.

The internationalism of this anthology is a fitting reminder of Scottish PEN's outward, generous concern for fellow writers across the globe. As a celebration of the fourteenth century document, this book might have been overtly political and narrowly focussed on its country of origin. However, it is outward looking, wide ranging in its locations and concerns.

More contributions in Scots or Gaelic in translation, might have been expected. Elaine Webster and Donald Adamson employ rich Scots in their contributions, and Finola Scott directly considers how Scots is the right voice for her, *the wurd fits ma hairtjistricht*.

Mary McCabe, in English, reminiscences of the time when, Gaelic speaking forbidden in the classroom, a hanging stick was placed upon the neck of the child heard speaking Gaelic. When another child was heard speaking Gaelic, the stick was passed to that child. The last one in the day would be punished. *Tha mi duilich? I am sorry?* In a volume dedicated to declarations of freedom, we're reminded of the many ways freedom can be removed from us.

This rich anthology won't merely be relevant to the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Declaration of Arbroath, the poems and prose will remain relevant until humanity accepts the individual's right to freedom. Sadly, thus, this book will remain relevant for many years to come.

**Liz Niven** is an award-winning Scottish poet. Collections include: *Stravaigin, Burning Whins, The Shard Box* (Luath Press, Edinburgh). Public art collaborations include text in stone and wood and she has participated in poetry Festivals across the world. Former teacher and Cultural Co-ordinator, she has facilitated poetry sessions to Scottish Poetry Library, London Poetry Society, Galleries and Museums. She has written a wide range of Scots education resources and is the author of Scots Dossier for European Bureau of Minority Languages. Awards include McCash poetry prize, Saltire/TESS and she is an Honorary Fellow of the Association of Scottish Literary Studies.