

Culture and Communities Committee

10.00am, Tuesday, 26 April 2022

Makars' Court: Proposed Additional Inscriptions

Executive/routine Wards Council Commitments	Routine 11 - City Centre
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1. Recommendations

- 1.1 It is recommended that Committee approves the addition of two proposed new inscriptions to Makars' Court.

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Makars' Court: Proposed Additional Inscriptions

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 This report provides background to the development of Makars' Court as a national monument to Scottish writers and summarises information about the two latest poets nominated for inclusion, Màiri Mhòr nan Òran (1821-1898), and George Bruce (1909-2002). Committee is asked to approve both applications.

3. Background

- 3.1 Makars' Court at the Writers' Museum celebrates the achievements of Scottish writers. This ongoing project to create a Scottish equivalent of Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey was the initiative of the former Culture and Leisure Department, in association with the Saltire Society and Lothian and Edinburgh Enterprise Ltd, as it was then known.
- 3.2 Makars' Court was officially inaugurated by the late Iain Crichton Smith in August 1998. The Saltire Society selected 12 writers, ranging in date from John Barbour, who lived in the 14th century, to Sorley MacLean, who died in 1996. Each writer was commemorated by a quotation selected from his or her work which was inscribed in stone and set in the paving which leads from the Mound and the Lawnmarket approaches to the door of the Writers' Museum.
- 3.3 Between October 2000 and March 2018, 29 other inscribed stones were added.

4. Main report

- 4.1 It was always the intention that Makars' Court would grow and develop into a Scottish national literary monument as more writers were commemorated, and new stones are continually being added thanks to the sponsorship of organisations, interest groups and individuals who can apply at any time by contacting the Museums and Galleries team.
- 4.2 The focus is of course on writers - born in Scotland, or who lived and worked in Scotland. However, Makars' Court is intended to represent the full range of those who have contributed to the nation's literary success. For example, publishers have played a major role in those achievements and may be considered, and the Makars'

Court Committee of the Saltire Society will also give consideration to writers and others who have not been identified through the open application system but are felt to have particular literary merit. There are two simple criteria that the committee consider:

4.2.1 The nominations are posthumous; and

4.2.2 The nominee must be of sufficient literary standing to merit inclusion.

4.3 At its meeting on 10 March 1997 the then Recreation Committee established that the method of selecting writers for commemoration would involve the Writers' Museum forwarding sponsorship requests for commemorating writers to the Saltire Society, who would in turn make a recommendation to the Council.

4.4 The Makars' Court Committee of the Saltire Society now recommends that two further applications be approved, to commemorate the poets **Màiri Mhòr nan Òran (1821-1898)**, and **George Bruce (1909-2002)**.

Màiri Mhòr nan Òran

4.5 Màiri Nic a' Phearsain (Mary MacPherson) is most commonly known as Màiri Mhòr nan Òran, 'Big Mary of the Songs'.

4.6 Originally from Skeabost in Skye, she spent many years in Inverness and then Glasgow before returning to Skye later in life. After being widowed, she worked as a domestic servant. In 1872, she was convicted of stealing from her employer, apparently unfairly. Her damaging experience with the law and the lasting effect it had on her is recorded in *Tha mi sgìth de luchd na Beurla* (I'm tired of the English speakers). She said that the humiliation (*tàmailt*) she endured brought her muse to life, and it was this injustice which spurred her to become a song-maker.

4.7 Mairi Mhòr moved to Glasgow on her release from prison. It was here she is believed to have learned to read and write in English and qualified with a nursing certificate and diploma in obstetrics from Glasgow Royal Infirmary. In 1876, she moved to Greenock to work but often returned to Glasgow for *cèilidhs* and other gatherings of Skye people. It is thought that she probably sang at many of these *cèilidhs* as there is evidence of her frequently doing so after she retired to Skye in 1882.

4.8 She is remembered for her active involvement in the Crofters' War and the Highland land issue, which provided the themes of some of her best known songs. She is known to have been present at Highland Land League meetings and to have known influential campaigners such as Alexander Mackenzie and her friend Fraser Mackintosh in the run up to the Napier Commission of 1883-4 and the Crofters Act of 1886.

4.9 By this time Màiri Mhòr had acquired a reputation for her songs. She sang at the first ever National Mòd in Oban in 1892 and came to achieve considerable celebrity in the Gàidhealtachd, a status she retains to the present day.

4.10 The sponsor states the reason for their choice as follows: 'There are currently only three Gaelic writers commemorated at Makars' Court (George Campbell Hay, Somhairle MacGill-Eain and Lachlann MacMhuirich). All of them are male. It would be highly appropriate to honour one of Gaeldom's best-known female poets.'

4.11 The proposed inscription, and source of the quotation, are as follows:

Màiri Mhòr nan Òran (Mary Macpherson)

1821-98

Cuimhnichibh gur sluagh sibh

Is cumaibh suas ur còir

(Remember that you are a people / And stand up for your rights)

From *The Highest Apple/An Ubhal as Àirde* (Francis Boutle Press, 2019), p. 522.

George Bruce

4.12 George Bruce, OBE MA, was a native of Fraserburgh where the family was in the herring trade. This inheritance is strongly reflected in much of his work, in Scots and English, not least in his first collections, *Sea Talk* (1944) and *Saltire Modern Poets* (1947). Kurt Wittig described Bruce's poetry of that period, such as *Kinnaird Head*, as, 'Hard as the rocky foreshores of the North East'. Wittig also said that later the granite of Buchan was superseded by Edinburgh limestone, grimy and friable'.

4.13 For over 20 years, Bruce was a BBC producer where he regularly promoted the work of his fellow poets (the only writer he is believed to have embargoed was himself). On his retirement, he was appointed as the first Fellow in Creative Writing at the University of Glasgow, held similar posts in the USA, and a Scottish-Australian Writing Fellowship.

4.14 Bruce's many collaborations and co-authorships included with several distinguished figures in the visual arts including Ann Redpath, William Gillies, Elizabeth Blackadder and John Bellany. With Blackadder he made illustrated haiku; with Bellany, two large folios of responses between poet and artist.

4.15 Of his anthologies, the most substantial is *Today Tomorrow: Collected Poems 1933-2000* (Polygon 2001), but it was *Pursuit – Poems 1986-1998* which won the Saltire Scotsman Award for the best Scottish book of 1999 by which time the poet was 90. In 2000, he received an honorary Doctorate from his alma mater, the University of Aberdeen, to add to another from Wooster College Ohio.

4.16 Throughout his life, Bruce was much involved in the promotion of poetry. As well as his life-long association with the Saltire Society, and PEN, he was an Honorary President of the Scottish Poetry Library and laid the foundation stone of its present building. His archive papers are held by National Library Scotland.

4.17 Bruce was cited by The Guardian newspaper as '...arguably the last great poet of the Scottish literary renaissance' following his death on 25 July 2002.

4.18 Bruce's poems continue to be bought and republished, for example as the *Poem of the Day* in *The Herald*. In that context, on 12 February 2021, his *Love in Age* was twinned with Burns' *John Anderson my Jo*, the two poems engaging in very similar sentiments.

4.19 The proposed inscription, and source of the quotation, are as follows:

George Bruce

1909 - 2002

The sea trembles - voiceless

It is the rare moment

when a word is sought

(from Pursuit. Poems 1986-1998. Haiku Envoi).

5. Next Steps

- 5.1 If Committee approve these inscriptions, the stonemason's designs for the inscriptions will be finalised and work will get underway to prepare Makars' Court for the installation of the new sandstone slabs.
- 5.2 Unveiling events will be arranged for both additions and are anticipated to take place during Summer or Autumn 2022.

6. Financial impact

- 6.1 All costs involved in designing, carving and laying the stones will be met by the respective sponsor.
- 6.2 Costs associated with the official unveiling of the stones can be contained within the Culture and Wellbeing revenue budget in 2022/23.

7. Stakeholder/Community Impact

- 7.1 Liaison with the sponsor and the Makars' Court Committee co-ordinated by the Saltire Society has taken place.
- 7.2 The additional stones will add to the amenity of the immediate area. No negative community impact is anticipated.

8. Background reading/external references

- 8.1 Inscriptions at Makar's Court, The Writer's Museum, Executive, [29 July 2003](#)
- 8.2 Makars' Court: Proposed additional inscription, Executive, [6 December 2005](#)

- 8.3 Makars' Court: Proposed additional inscriptions, Executive, [6 June 2006](#)
- 8.4 Makars' Court: Proposed Additional inscription, Culture and Leisure Committee, [22 June 2010](#)
- 8.5 Makars' Court: Proposed Additional inscriptions, Culture and Leisure Committee, [26 April 2011](#)
- 8.6 Makars' Court: Proposed Additional inscription, Culture and Sport Committee, [20 August 2013](#)
- 8.7 Makars' Court: Proposed Additional inscription, Culture and Sport Committee, [22 October 2013](#)
- 8.8 Makars' Court: Proposed Additional inscription, Culture and Sport Committee [11 March 2014](#)
- 8.9 Makars' Court: Proposed Additional inscriptions, Culture and Sport Committee [20 March 2017](#)
- 8.10 Makars' Court: Proposed Additional inscription, Culture and Communities Committee, [20 March 2018](#)

9. Appendices

- 9.1 None.