



***The Saltire
Literary Awards
Test of Time***

Celebrating the Scottish Imagination



80 YEARS OF INSPIRATION
THE SALTIRE SOCIETY

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SOCIETY
SCOTLAND



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***Celebrating the
Scottish imagination***

Welcome to a celebration of 80 years of the Saltire Society and its work. Those who started the Saltire Society in 1936 feared that Scotland's cultural gas was at a peep, that the achievements of the past were unrecognised, great traditions were being lost and

contemporary arts lacked vitality. They did something about it.

They formed a movement that for 80 years has promoted, presented, published, agitated and debated and in doing so helped create the conditions for today's thriving and confident creative Scotland.

In this context the Saltire Society commissioned a 'Test of Time' research project, reflecting on the Saltire Society Literary Awards and allowing the Society, the industry and the general public to better understand the longevity and significance of Scottish literature.

This essay is the culmination of Stevie Marsden's research.

saltire@saltiresociety.org.uk

[@Saltire_Society](#) [#Saltire80](#)

Scottish Charity Number 004962

About Stevie Marsden

Stevie Marsden's thesis 'The Saltire Society's Literary Awards 1936-2015: A Cultural History' is the first comprehensive study into the history of the Saltire Society's Literary Awards and their role within Scottish literary culture. Stevie has presented papers based on her research into the Society's Literary Awards at conferences all over the world and will be publishing this history as a monograph in the near future.

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Introduction

The Saltire Society was founded in 1936 in Glasgow, Scotland, as an independent advocate and supporter of Scottish culture. To this day, the Society aims to celebrate the full breadth of Scotland's cultural landscape, holding events and presenting awards for the many elements of Scottish culture including architecture, literature, civil engineering, and arts and crafts, as well as conferring the Fletcher of Saltoun Award annually to individuals who are believed to have made a meaningful contribution to Scottish culture. While central to the Society's work, such awards have frequently been underestimated, unappreciated and, at times, nearly forgotten altogether. Despite a long history dating back to the Society's formative years, the Society's Literary Awards have not been spared from such problems.

And yet here we are, celebrating the Society's 80th year and the 34th year of the Society's Book of the Year Award (which was expanded into the Fiction and Non-Fiction Book of the Year Awards in 2015). Far from losing their significance or prominence within Scottish literary and publishing culture, as the only series of awards dedicated to celebrating literature about Scotland, published in Scotland or written by Scottish authors, the Society's Literary Awards have become an integral player within the Scottish literary landscape. The awards enable books, authors and publishers that may not ordinarily receive attention in an incredibly competitive and saturated literary marketplace to be brought to the fore and commended for their achievements. The roll call of previous winners of the Literary Awards is remarkable. Authors like Alasdair Gray, James Kelman William McIlvanney, Tom Leonard, Muriel Spark, Norman MacCaig, Iain Crichton Smith, Alan Warner, Ali Smith, Liz Lochhead, Janice Galloway, James Robertson,

Jackie Kay, Kate Atkinson, A. L. Kennedy and Michel Faber have all received Saltire Society Literary Awards over the past 34 years. What's more, Kennedy, Kay, Faber and Smith all received the Society's First Book of the Year Award for their debut works before going on to have marvellously illustrious careers and, in most cases, winning the Society's Book of the Year Award. Such trends indicate that the Society's Literary Award judging panels have, over the years, had an eye for recognising the best writing talent Scotland has to offer.

While the awards are relatively well-known in Scotland, little is known about the histories of the awards, which have evolved massively over the past 34 years. Before considering how the Society's Awards need to develop in the future to continue to 'stand the test of time', it is important to establish a brief history of how the awards came to be where they are today.

The Saltire Society Literary Awards – A Brief History

The very first Saltire Society Book of the Year Awards were awarded to Robert Gore-Brown's *Lord Bothwell* and Neil Gunn's *Highland River* and the highly accomplished judging panel consisted of Eric Linklater, Compton Mackenzie and Edwin Muir. Two further awards were made in 1937 to Agnes Mure Mackenzie's *The Passing of the Stewarts* and Robert McClellan's *Three Plays in Scots*. A further three books were commended before the awards went on hiatus (due to the outbreak of war) in 1940: Fred Urquhart's *Time Will Knit*, Edwin Muir's *The Story and the Fable* and J. A. Bowie's *The Future of Scotland*. Perhaps deliberately, all of these books reflected the Society's constitutional aims of celebrating all that is best in Scottish culture. Following a 15 year hiatus, the Society's Book of the Year Award would return, somewhat more formally established, but the set-up of this award was marred by various issues, most

notably the death of the historian Agnes Mure Mackenzie who had been working with the Society in the re-establishment of the Scottish Book of the Year Award. While Mackenzie's death halted progress of the Book of the Year Award, it did inspire the founding of the Agnes Mure Mackenzie Memorial Award for Scottish Historical Research that has since become known as the Society's History Book of the Year Award which is awarded annually to this day.

Following the re-establishment of the Book of the Year Award in 1955, in 1956 the award was given to Edwin Muir once again for *One Foot in Eden*. The next award was given to George Hay in 1957 *The Architecture of Scottish Post-Reformation Churches* – a selection which highlights the eclecticism of the selections made by the judges at the time. Following this, Stuart Piggot's *Scotland Before History* was awarded the award in 1958 and this would be the final Book of the Year Award conferred by the Society

until the award was re-established yet again in 1982.

It was Paul Henderson Scott who proposed in 1981 that the Society should once again re-establish the Book of the Year Award. The award was organised once again, this time with sponsorship from the Royal Bank of Scotland, and has been awarded annually ever since. Alasdair Gray received the first of the re-launched Book of the Year Award in 1982. Seemingly shy on receiving his award Gray was reported as being ‘a man of few words’ who ‘rose from his seat, said “Thank you,” and sat back down again!’. The Society’s Literary Award ceremonies would remain this sedate until the mid-1990s when they would be televised by STV (who became co-sponsors of the First Book of the Year Award in 1990 alongside *The Scotsman*) alongside the McVitie’s Prize for Scottish Writer of the Year and the Scottish Arts Council’s Literary Awards.

In 1988 Scott also instigated the development of an award for ‘first books’ by emerging authors. This wasn’t the first

time the Society had considered celebrating debut works. In 1937 it had been recommended to the Society that an award for First Books should be instated, but an anonymous member of the Society's Council at the time suggested that 'what was wanted for novels was Birth Control' and not encouragement. The Society's First Book of the Year Award flourished from the offset, with a high calibre of work being recognised from the start. The historic shortlists and winners of the First Book of the Year Award not only reflect the emergence of some of Scotland's best known authors, such as John Burnside, Janice Galloway, A. L. Kennedy, Irvine Welsh and Ali Smith, but looking back also reveals how the Scottish publishing industry was beginning to develop in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Polygon, for example, was a leading figure in recognising the exceptional talent that was emerging in Scotland during this period.

The Society's First Book of the Year Award also illustrates

the sheer variety of books that are shortlisted for, or win, Saltire Society Literary Awards. Biographies, fiction (including a range of genres like crime, sci-fi, literary, historic), short stories, poetry and plays have all been shortlisted for the award and Scotland's linguistic diversity is often represented with Scots and Gaelic regularly winning awards. Being recognised by the Society's judges and winning the First Book of the Year Award can not only give new writers a boost in confidence, but it can introduce their work to new readers and audiences that may not otherwise be exposed to their work.

While the Society's Book of the Year and First Book of the Year Awards are arguably the most well-known of the Society's Literary Awards, the History Book of the Year and Research Book of the Year Awards give essential exposure to literary fields that can be overlooked by the media, booksellers and the public at large. Having the Research and History Book of the Year Awards conferred alongside

the awards that are generally considered to be the more mainstream awards goes some way to preventing an almost hierarchical approach to literature. While winning a Saltire Society Literary Award does not necessarily guarantee a research or history book will go on to sell thousands of copies, it offers the writers and publishers of such books an opportunity to be recognised on the same platform as their peers writing in a variety of other genres.

In recent years, the Society's Literary Awards have undergone somewhat of a transformation. Since 2013 the Society has continued to develop the Literary Awards schema to facilitate a more cohesive celebration of the different types of literature recognised by the Society. In 2013 the Society's first Scottish Publisher of the Year Award was conferred to the independent Glasgow-based publisher Saraband. Just this year Saraband became the first Scottish publisher to have a book by a Scottish author shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. The Society's Poetry

Book of the Year Award was inaugurated in 2014. Acting as yet another example of the Society's skill in recognising the best creatives that Scotland has to offer. While poetry books had always been included within the Book of the Year and First Book of the Year Award categories, the Society felt it was important to celebrate this oft-forgotten genre that has experienced somewhat of a boom in recent years. 2014 was also the year in which the awarding system of the Society's Literary Awards was changed for the first time in its history. From 2014 each of the category winners of the Society's six Literary Awards receive £2,000 and become the shortlist for the 'Scottish Book of the Year Award', the winner of which receives an additional £6,000. Such changes have further emphasised the status of the Society's Literary Awards as a 'family' of awards for Scottish literature.

Looking To The Future – The Next 80 Years

While it is clear the Society's Literary Awards have, quite literally, withstood the test of time, enduring as other major Scottish literary awards have perished – most notably the McVitie's Scottish Writer of the Year and the Scottish Mortgage Investment Trust Book Awards – if the awards are to remain as a key part of the Scottish literary landscape, they must continue to evolve as publishing and literature does. Reading, writing, book selling (and buying!), publishing and the role of the author have all changed dramatically in the 80 years since the Society was founded and its first literary award was bestowed. In the current creative economy, awards like the Saltire Society Literary Awards are not only competing against other, wealthier awards, but are also competing against bloggers and online reviewers who are making the kind of impact to and author and book's sales that was once the reserve of

awards and literary critics. It's becoming increasingly more difficult to for literary awards to make the sort of impact they need to make to maintain any authority or purpose.

So how can the Society's Literary Awards ensure survival for a further 80 years? First and foremost, the Society needs to remain aware of developments in the publishing world that impact how literature is produced, published and disseminated. The most recent developments made to the awards show a commitment to this and it has to continue. Just this year the Society held Scotland's largest online literary festival, #ScotLitFest, which saw Scottish authors and publishers engage with a readership from all over the world. This kind of event, which breaks down the barriers between author and reader, and encourages direct engagement, are central to the future of engagement with readers and audiences. It would be fair to say that, while it has always been an organisation focused upon engaging with it's members and those interested in Scotland's

culture and arts scene, the Saltire Society's Literary Awards have not always engaged with as wide an audience as it could. This hasn't always been the fault of the Society. The Executive Director, Jim Tough, has expressed deep concerns about denounced the year on year failure for any television or radio broadcaster, such as STV or BBC Scotland to come along to the Society's Literary Awards ceremony, or indeed, return any calls regarding possible collaborations and coverage. BBC Scotland did send a two-person crew to the ceremony held at Dynamic Earth in 2014; the year that but this was likely because two of the BBC's leading broadcasters, Sally Magnusson and Kirsty Wark, were shortlisted for awards! that year. The Society's Literary Awards also rarely receive much in the way of coverage South of the border, despite the fact that some of the authors being shortlisted or winning the awards are internationally renowned authors who have gone on to win a multitude of awards.

On the one hand, it is frustrating to see the Literary Awards receive so little in the way of attention, particularly when they are Scotland's longest running series of book awards, but on the other hand, perhaps we shouldn't wait around for the more traditional media outlets to cover the awards. #ScotLitFest was a perfect example of how a non-traditional approach can help an organisation like the Saltire Society, which has an exceptional, but tiny, staff and limited financial resources to engage with wider audiences. But for this to work the Society needs to own the narrative and history of the Literary Awards be able to effectively retell it. One of the reasons why the Man Booker Prize became the behemoth it is today is because it knows its history and purpose inside out and effectively resells it each year. Likewise, it doesn't shy away from controversy or criticism. Instead of shying away from any potential controversy that may come from authors or books it has shortlisted, the Society should embrace it. This is not to suggest the Literary Awards should be deliberately

antagonistic, but it should perhaps assert itself as an arbiter of literary value more forcefully: these are the Saltire Society Literary Awards, hear them roar. Publishers, authors and readers have a role to play in this too. Scottish publishers are incredibly supportive of the awards and are always cooperative when it comes to the organisation of the award. Authors, too, are always complimentary about the awards and believe inclusion on a Saltire Society Literary Award shortlist to be prestigious. Exactly how this prestige is quantified is tricky to pin down. The Society's Literary Awards don't have the kind of impact some other awards can have on the sales of books shortlisted. So the 'prestige' does not necessarily come from the economic impact the award can have on an author and publisher. It may be that the Society's Literary Award judges, many of whom have been, or are, well-known academics or literary critics lend their own reputation to the awards. In other words, the status and collective knowledge of the panels reinforces the significance of the choices they make and

their expertise and experience enables them to select the best Scottish literature. Accordingly, by the very nature of awards, evaluation and selection generate such notions of prestige by default.

The reason why the Society's Literary Awards are often described as being prestigious, despite their being little in the way of tangible evidence of this, is because of their longevity and 'narrative of success'. The Society can confidently assert that it's judges have not only frequently shortlisted books which have gone on to receive huge critical acclaim, such as Gray's *Lanark* in 1982, Welsh's *Trainspotting* in 1993, Warner's *Morvern Callar* in 1995 and Kennedy's *Day* in 2007 (the list goes on and on), but that they recognise potential, both in publishers and authors. The roll call of shortlistees and winners of the Society's Literary Awards are what makes the awards so special. If you are shortlisted for the award you join a long list of exceptional Scottish talent and become part of the Society's

narrative. *This* is the unique story the Society should be telling about its Literary Awards.

This is not to say people have always agreed with the decisions the Society's Literary Award judging panels have made or, indeed, the make up of the panels. What is arguably one of the most contentious issues surrounding the Society's Literary Awards is the fact that many of the judges have been members of the panel for many, many years. While the pros to such a system are obvious – these judges understand the awards inside out, they are extremely well read and versed in Scottish literature and developed an approach to working together as a panel – the cons are still there. This system of limited rotation of the panel has perhaps hindered the development of the awards in previous years. The awards have been accused of being staid and predictable at times and one way to avoid such accusations is to have a fresh judging panel, if not every year at least every four or five years. As an

organisation that prides itself on offering an independent platform for creative voices, the Society has a duty to remain inclusive and diverse in its selection of judges. This is not only a way to ensure diversity in the selections made by the panel, but it may also encourage different audiences to engage with the awards. As with the more general developments made to the Society's Literary Awards in recent years, changes have been made to the panels but if the awards are going to survive they need to maintain this dynamism. The new poetry prize has involved new panel members Robyn Marsack, Dorothy McMillan and Roderick Watson. In recent years the Literary Awards judging panel has seen the appointment of a new Convener in highly respected literary editor David Robinson, and the appointment of new panel members Hannah McGill, Jenny Niven and Mark Wringe. This momentum needs to be maintained.

However, all of this shouldn't fall on the shoulders of the

Society alone. Literary awards work best when authors, publishers, journalists, broadcasters, bloggers and readers engage with them. Authors must continue to value the awards and *want* to be part of the history of the awards. Publishers must continue to submit books for the Society's awards and hold events with their shortlisted or winning authors to open the conversation about books and the Society's Literary Awards. Column inches dedicated to literature have all but disappeared from the Scottish press, but that shouldn't stop the conversation about books and awards in Scotland. The Society makes great efforts to enlist the support of traditional media and they consistently fail to cooperate. So the Society should continue to broaden their horizons digitally, working with bloggers and social media to captivate new audiences and remain relevant. The Society's partnership with the Society of Young Publishers Scotland in 2015, which saw the establishment of shadow judging panels and the means of pursuing the Publishing Scotland initiative for an Emerging

Publisher Award, is an excellent example of how the Literary Awards remain relevant within the contemporary publishing industry. BBC Scotland and STV should be enthusiastic and active supporters of what is a significant cultural event in Scotland's year and Scotland's book festivals could be more active partners in profiling the award winners. Scotland is home to Britain's oldest literary award, the James Tait Black, and yet discussions about literary award culture and how it functions in Scotland today are not apart of the conversations we have about literature in Scotland.

There is no doubt that the Society's Literary Awards could survive, and thrive, in the next 80 years, but they can't simply *exist*. They must be a living entity. Being shortlisted for the awards should be a privilege and make a tangible difference to an author's reputation and book sales. The ceremonies and announcements should be sell out events, receiving wide-spread coverage (in both traditional and

new media). The Society may continue to struggle to entice the press South of the border to be interested in the awards, but getting an article in *The Guardian* or *The Telegraph* isn't what makes an award worthwhile. What makes an award matter is that those directly involved with it – the administrators, the judges, the publishers, the authors – understand the history of the award and retell this to readers and future shortlistees. It is this knowledge and recognition of the Society's Literary Award's heritage that will make it possible for the Awards to continue as a significant element of Scotland's literary landscape in the future.

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We are;

- An apolitical membership organisation open to all
- An international supporter and patron of the arts and cultural heritage of Scotland
- A champion of free speech on the issues that matter to the cultural life of every Scot
- A promoter of the best of what we are culturally, now and in the future
- A catalyst to ensure new ideas are considered and the best of them are made real

We believe we have an important and unique role to play, as an independent advocate and celebrant of all that is good and important about our cultural lives and achievements. The Society has played a crucial role over the last seventy five years, in recognising our cultural achievements. And while times have changed the need for that independent voice remains.

9 Fountain Close, 22 High Street
Edinburgh, EH1 1TF
Tel: 0131 556 1836
saltire@saltiresociety.org.uk
www.saltiresociety.org.uk



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