

12-22-2023

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Recommended Citation

Stoddart, Dr Helen (2022) "A History of the Scottish P.E.N. Organization, Part 1: 1927-1949," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 48: Iss. 2, 148–167.

DOI: 10.51221/suc.ssl.2023.48.2.12

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol48/iss2/13>

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A HISTORY OF THE SCOTTISH P.E.N. ORGANISATION, 1927-1949

Helen Stoddart

While PEN International is a worldwide organisation, Scottish PEN has had a distinct history, involving many of the most significant Scottish writers in each generation over the past hundred years.¹ This article traces the story of the first decades after PEN's founding, and of the writers involved, casting light, not only on the international movement for humanity, but also on the writers themselves, on their interactions, and on cultural and political developments within Scottish society.

What is now PEN International (originally "P.E.N.," an acronym for "Poets, Essayists, Novelists") began in 1921 with an "English Centre" in London.² The writers who founded it included Cynthia Dawson Scott and John Galsworthy, with Galsworthy serving as its first president. Its founding principles, which remain largely unchanged to this day, address the profound destruction caused by World War I by proclaiming the necessity for international cooperation amongst writers through "friendship and intellectual cooperation" in order to promote "literature, freedom of expression and international goodwill."³ Above all, the organisation was opposed to being used for "State or party politics," standing instead "for

¹ This essay, focusing on the inter-War period and immediate post-War periods, is the first of two essays marking the centenary of Scottish PEN, planned in collaboration with Prof. Gerard Carruthers, with support from the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

² Though both the international body and the Scottish affiliate rebranded in 2010 as PEN and Scottish PEN without the punctuation, P.E.N. is retained here in most quotations and references, following usage in the period discussed. .

³ *The P.E.N Club: a World Association of Writers English Centre Prospectus* (London, 1950), 1. British Library Archive file 11866 aa42. The principles of the charter were largely established in 1921 with a final form being adopted in the Copenhagen Congress of 1948. For a recent account of the organisation's founding, see Carles Torner and Jan Martens, eds, *PEN International: an Illustrated History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2021).

the principle of unhampered transmission of thought within each nation and between all nations,” opposing “any form of suppression of freedom of expression in the country and community to which they belong.”⁴

This small founding centre in London was soon to grow many affiliated organisations, thus confirming its identity almost immediately as P.E.N. International, a “World Association of Writers.”⁵ By October 1927, a Scottish chapter of P.E.N. was established, publishing its own *Rules of the Scottish Centre of the P.E.N.* the same year. This study of the Scottish organisation’s searly years, from 1927-1949 (just before Scotland hosted its second international P.E.N. Congress in 1950) is based on documents held in the archives of both the National Library of Scotland and the British Library. It provides a detailed picture of the way the S.P.E.N. established for itself a distinctive, more regional, institutional structure and identity from the outset, albeit one firmly rooted in the common values of “friendship and intellectual co-operation” and “freedom of expression and international goodwill” which unite and define all P.E.N. organisations (*ibid.*). This history draws together, for the first time, a wide range of sources, including letter correspondence, journalism, biographies, minutes of meetings, online archives and club newsletters, to provide a comprehensive overview and analysis of the shaping figures, events and debates from which contemporary S.P.E.N grew.

The early years of Scottish P.E.N. provide evidence of growing confidence and ambition in Scottish culture, one that would be crucial to “Scottish Renaissance” of the 1930s, just as the the Scottish Renaissance instigators would be crucial to Scottish P.E.N. In this development P.E.N.’s 1934 International Congress functioned as a clear point of crystallisation as well as self-reflection. Equally, however, the drama of these years reveals the personal, political, and aesthetic tensions, rivalries and disagreements both within the organisation and between it and other P.E.N. chapters, often fuelled by the challenges to membership, morale, finances and ideological coherence posed by World War II and the years of economic depression which preceded it.

Correspondence in May of 1927 between Christopher Grieve⁶ and his friend, the novelist Neil Gunn, indicates that the initiative for the Scottish centre came from John Galsworthy.⁷ In the first instance he had asked Prof.

⁴ See the current PEN International website: <https://pen-international.org/who-we-are/the-pen-charter>.

⁵ *The P.E.N. Club: a World Association of Writers English Centre, Prospectus*, 1.

⁶ “Hugh MacDiarmid” was always referred to within P.E.N. meetings and documents as Christopher Grieve, the name used here throughout.

⁷ Letter from C.M. Grieve to Neil Gunn, 16th May, 1927: Dorian Grieve, Owen Dudley Edwards and Alan Riach, eds, *New Selected Letter of Hugh MacDiarmid*

Herbert Grierson, of Edinburgh University, to form a Scottish centre. Grierson, though he would go on to play a more prominent role than Grieve in the early years of Scottish P.E.N., then contacted Grieve because, as the latter notes, “although Sir J.M. Barrie, R.B. Cunninghame Graham and a few other Scottish authors are members of the London Centre,” Grierson was “the only member, I think, regularly resident in Scotland.” Grieve also had the advantage of having been at the centre of a network of the country’s young writers in the early 1920s through his editorship of several periodicals—*Scottish Chapbook*, *The Scottish Nation* and *The Northern Review*. Grieve’s letter to Gunn foregrounds the idea that the impetus for the founding of Scottish P.E.N. came from “the London Centre’s Executive Committee”; Grieve reports that the committee was “keenly desirous of completing the chain of international centres with sections in Edinburgh and Glasgow,” and that the delay to its establishment alongside other European countries was only a result of “pressure of other work” in his schedule.

At the same time, Grieve’s letter notes a reported desire for two Scottish sections, not one. This is a telling echo of Grieve’s own conviction expressed elsewhere in the letter that Scotland’s literary culture is not “concentrated in any one city,” and should therefore follow what “has been successfully done in certain other countries,” where membership of the national centre involved membership of both sections “and of all the other international centres” (*ibid.*). A survey in 1927 of other international P.E.N. organisations, however, reveals relatively few with multiple sections, just six out of 25 countries: America, Canada, Germany, Italy, “Jugo-Slavia,” and Spain. All those with multiple centres have more obvious geographical, demographic and political grounds for founding separate sections than Scotland with its two major cities, less than 50 miles apart.⁸

In fact, the founding document, *Rules of the Scottish P.E.N. Centre*, reveals that the organisation was even more structurally regionalized than Grieve’s initial correspondence indicates. While Glasgow and Edinburgh had 6 members each on the management committee, there were also

(Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2001), 217-18. The contributions of Catharine Dawson Scott, John Galsworthy, Hugh MacDiarmid and John Galsworthy are outlined as nos. 1, 12, and 29 in the series “#100PENMembers; see “Writers and Free Expression”: <https://writersandfreeexpression.com/category/pen-key-figures/> (accessed 31 May 2022).

⁸ *P.E.N. News*, n.4, 2 June 1927, 1. Though the Scottish centre is not yet on this list, the newsletter confirms that “efforts are being made to form a Scottish centre” for which an “inaugural meeting is to be held in Glasgow” and for which twenty members have already been identified (3). The run of *P.E.N. News* used for this project, which is the only continuous run located in any U.K. library, was British Library P.P.5264.ra.

sections for Gaelic, Inverness, Aberdeen & Dundee, each of which was represented by one member each, creating a mix of linguistic, cultural and geographic diversity, though apart from the Gaelic section, the others are rarely reported on in the regular updates published in P.E.N. news.⁹ Helen Cruickshank, an Edinburgh-based poet who would go on to succeed Grieve in his role as Honorary Secretary, notes that, in practice, the Gaelic section “never operated very noticeably,” but its establishment was functionally and symbolically important in establishing Scotland’s linguistic and cultural distinction from England in the minds of other international sections.¹⁰

Grieve’s formal involvement with the organisation was famously short-lived: his letter of resignation from the role of Honorary Secretary in February 1929 cites not only the “increasing pressure of other work” but also his sense that, with his move to London that year to work on Compton Mackenzie’s radio magazine *Vox*, he now lives “too far away from the centre—or centres—of things in Scotland to carry out the duties as effectively as I would desire.”¹¹ Again, his careful insistence here on Scotland’s multiple *centres*—part observation, part manifesto—speaks of Grieve’s commitment to Scottish regionalism and to the less metropolitan, geographically dispersed emphases in relation to culture and modernism within the Scottish Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s more generally.¹² Some Scottish writers who were early Scottish P.E.N. members could be sceptical about Grieve’s concept of renaissance.¹³ Nonetheless, Grieve and Gunn were soon followed by Edwin and Willa Muir, Naomi Mitchison, Catherine Carswell, Helen Cruickshank, Nan Shepherd, Eric Linklater,

⁹ *Rules of the Scottish Centre of the P.E.N.*, 5.

¹⁰ Helen Cruickshank, *Octobiography*, (Montrose: Standard Press, 1976), 68. This is underlined by the account provided by Moira Burgess in “Scottish Pen” of William Power’s contribution to the 1928 Oslo congress where his speech in favour of Scotland’s independent (from England) representation in P.E.N. was initially questioned: see David Finkelstein and Alistair McLeery, eds, *The History of the Book in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 38. For an excellent account of Cruickshank’s life and contribution to Scottish letters, see Jenni Calder, “Helen Cruickshank: Bide the Storm Ye Canna Hinder,” *The Bottle Imp*, no. 27 (December 2020): <https://www.thebottleimp.org.uk/2020/12/helen-cruickshank-bide-the-storm-ye-canna-hinder/> (accessed 31 May 2022).

¹¹ C.M. Grieve, “Secretary’s Resignation,” *P.E.N. News*, February 1929, 4.

¹² See, e.g., Robert Crawford’s claim about Scottish modernism that the “Orkney and Shetland Islands and small coastal towns like Montrose were more important to its nurturing than Glasgow and Edinburgh”: Crawford, “Country Lear,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 November 2009.

¹³ See Calder, “Helen Cruickshank,” and cf. Cruickshank’s reference to “the so-called Scottish Renaissance” as mainly centred on Grieve: *Octobiography*, 77.

Compton Mackenzie, and J.L. Mitchell (Lewis Grassie Gibbon). The first 20 members also included a more diverse range of high-profile figures: poet Lady Margaret Sackville, Professor Grierson of Edinburgh, arctic explorer and botanist Isobel Hutchison, Professor W.J. Entwistle (Stevenson Professor of Spanish, Glasgow University), as well as two further figures in the Scottish National Movement (which Grieve joined in 1928), its founder Lewis Spence and the journalist, poet and future leader, William Power.¹⁴

Yet Grieve's resignation letter of 1929 is intriguing for the way he asserts the need for

welding the scattered elements of literary Scotland into such an homogenous whole as would enable the Scottish Centre to compare more favorably with the Centres in other countries and embody the eligible personnel in the country in a more representative fashion

while also acknowledging the incompatibility of his own personality (which he describes as a "stormy petrel") with this task of bringing Scottish P.E.N. forward under one leadership.¹⁵ The reference to homogeneity under the force of "welding" might imply disapproval, even while recognizing the political necessity may be reluctant, indicating a genuine acknowledgement of the tension between Scotland's disparate but growing literary culture and the organisation, political and representational imperatives of P.E.N. International. Grieve's thanks on departure are extended only to Herman Ould (London), Helen Cruickshank, and Alex McGill (Glasgow convenor), and his letters thereafter feature little about P.E.N. events or reports, even though he was a delegate at both the 1929 Vienna and the 1932 Prague Congresses.

As Alan Bold notes, however, Grieve's attitude to the organisation in the 1930s appears to have become increasingly bitter and dismissive, as exemplified by his publication in *Modern Scot* to coincide with the 1934 Edinburgh Congress of his caustically satirical poem, "Welcome to the PEN Delegates." The poem's derision is Swiftian in its contempt:

GENIUS of Europe, welcome to the land,
Fit least of all your gifts to understand,
Tet, happ'ly, so unable to perceive
Its incapacity you'll needs receive
A greater, if a queerer welcome here...
...
The welcome from "the insensate mob" will
Give you the unspeakable sensation
Of being mothered by a Yahoo nation,
...

¹⁴ *P.E.N. News*, 2 June 1927, 3.

¹⁵ C. M. Grieve, "Secretary's Resignation," 4.

As if this Muse or that had suddenly found
 Herself transported from her sacred ground
 To some Defectives' Fête or Highland Mod.¹⁶

Grieve's resignation, then, appears to have been from the organisation as a whole, something which is confirmed by a dispute recorded in the minutes of the 1939 AGM over his expenses for the attendance as a "guest" at a dinner hosted by William Power, though it is clear that the organisation did not forget its debt to him.¹⁷

By 15th October 1927, Scottish P.E.N. is listed alongside the other 28 centres. The centre was launched with a dinner at the North British Hotel, Edinburgh, at which the guest of honour was John Galsworthy, as a P.E.N. International founding member. Presiding was the English poet and Edinburgh resident Margaret Sackville, who in her introduction modestly described S.P.E.N. as "a very audacious infant in aspiring at so early a stage in its career to so illustrious a guest," though noting that "their success" had justified "their audacity."¹⁸

Galsworthy's speech, as reported in *P.E.N. News*, however, is striking for the nationalism to which it continually and mischievously alludes. Drawing humorously on longstanding rivalries between England and Scotland he joked that he was "very glad that the P.E.N. had conquered at last the invincible race he saw represented at that table. (Laughter)," and went on to observe that it

was natural, it was fitting, that Edinburgh and Glasgow should distrust an idea which emanated from London (laughter)—and it did give them down there the greater gratification that, at last, Scotland had crowned their efforts with success (*ibid.*).

The reported responses indicate this vein of humour was well-received, and Galsworthy went on to emphasize that P.E.N.'s internationalism should not be regarded as a threat to national identity, indeed

he hoped that nobody there would think that they of the PEN club believed that the vital spark of literature was anything but deeply

¹⁶ Alan Bold, *MacDiarmid: Christopher Murray Grieve, a Critical Biography* (London: Paladin Books, 1990), 308; Hugh MacDiarmid, "Welcome to the PEN Delegates," in Michael Grieve and W.R. Aitken, eds, *Hugh MacDiarmid Complete Poems 1920-1976*, 2 vols (London: Martin Brian and O'Keefe, 1978), II: 1299-1302 (1299). In June 1933, Grieve has begun to express hostility to Scottish P.E.N. and does so in a letter to Neil Gunn: Alan Bold, ed., *The Letters of Hugh MacDiarmid* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1984), 252.

¹⁷ AGM Minutes, May 1939: N.L.S., Acc 8560, No.4. Helen Cruickshank reports that Grieve had been invited to "accept a gift of books as a token of the centre's appreciation of his work as founder and first secretary": "Scottish Centre," *P.E.N. News*, October 1929, 4.

¹⁸ "Mr Galsworthy's Visit," *P.E.N. News*, November 1927, 2-3.

national (Applause). Their writers must draw at national springs (*ibid.*).

He argues for “the ‘home made’ nature of all writing” which “always must and would be” a reflection of “their own countries—a Scotsman was a Scotsman, and an Englishman was an Englishman, for a’ that” (*ibid.*).

Galsworthy is clearly well aware, therefore, that his address to the 25 members of S.P.E.N. and their guests needed to validate the concern for national identity and autonomy being argued for by Grieve, Power and Spence and to soften the potential contradiction of P.E.N. as an international organisation being used “for the betterment of Scottish letters” and “for the advancement of that Scottish nationality which was undoubtedly the first though all true Scotsmen should have in their minds at the present time” (*ibid.*). As the constitution document of 1927 also takes care to clarify, literature is “national in origin,” but this should not be allowed to be an obstacle to the broader purpose of “fostering goodwill and understanding between the races and nations” and preventing it from being “used as weapons of propaganda ... in the name of Chauvinism, racial prejudice and political ill-will.”¹⁹ The good-humoured nationalist rivalry enjoyed at this dinner between English and Scottish members was soon to be overtaken by a much more sinister nationalism. The advancing agenda of nationalism and national Socialism in Europe in the 1930s would bring this tension between national roots, friendly internationalism and non-chauvinism to the foreground.²⁰

Scottish P.E.N.’s membership flourished, growing from 25 in 1927 to 55 the following year, when it secured ongoing use of “club rooms” at 9 Albany Street in Edinburgh.²¹ By 1934, membership stood at 167 (with the addition of 28 Gaelic members). There is also evidence of healthy discussion about its purpose with the Scottish Nationalist journalist George Malcom Thomson leading an open debate in the club rooms, chaired by William Powers, on the motion “Is Scottish P.E.N. any Good?”²² A “large turnout” was reported, and the debate appears to have been an attempt steer power away from the Edinburgh section (which “came in for a good deal of pungent criticism”) and to ensure that the organisation did not get so distracted by its pleasant social activities that it neglected to “make a definite effort to quicken the literary life of Scotland”, with proposals being made for a Scottish Universities press and the promotion of a National

¹⁹ *Rules of the Scottish Centre of the P.E.N.*, 3

²⁰ Helen Cruickshank comments on S.P.E.N. in this period that “there is no doubt that the rising tide of national Scottish sentiment brought many members into the movement”: *Octobiography*, 68.

²¹ *P.E.N. News*, May 1928, 6.

²² *P.E.N. News*, November 1929, 6.

Book Week to ensure that Scotland made a worthy contribution to the “International Movement” (*ibid*).

What is clear from the proceedings of this early period following Grieve’s departure is that, in her seven years as honorary secretary, Helen Cruickshank had a strong shaping influence on the early years of S.P.E.N. as well as a long-lasting one. Not only was her role more sustained than Grieve’s, but her generosity of time, diplomacy and good judgement served the organisation in crucial ways. In her autobiography she notes the danger of “too much respectability” among the membership, events and debates of the late-1920s. Seeing a risk that S.P.E.N. would become “too respectable” and too parochial, she sought to strengthen it by securing the membership and attendance of high-profile expatriate Scots, mostly from London, including A.J. Cronin, Naomi Mitchison, Edwin and Willa Muir and R.B. Cunninghame Graham. But the formal events, which now included dinners promoting new editions from Scottish publishers of some of Scotland’s still neglected Makars (Dunbar, Henryson and Allan Ramsay, for example) were also supplemented by “informal gatherings,” several of which appear to have been hosted at Cruickshank’s as well as Lady Margaret Saville’s houses. Without dedicated premises and with limited funds, the organisation relied very heavily in these early years on the patronage of figures with independent wealth or property, or in Cruickshank’s case, a devotion to the cause which led her to combine her considerable work for the organisation with her job as a civil servant, her own poetry writing and her personal commitments.²³

In 1932, Cruickshank was instrumental in the Scottish P.E.N. being invited to host P.E.N.’s XIIth International Congress in Scotland. It took place between the 17th and 22nd of June, 1934, though the work towards and during it was clearly a huge strain, and Cruickshank resigned as secretary-treasurer soon afterwards.²⁴ The surviving documentation on the congress offers a remarkable insight into both Scotland’s conception of

²³ Cruickshank notes that she had to train herself to get by on five hours sleep per night in order to be able to carry out all her various duties, including her full-time civil service job, and that “on her salary” she “could not have afforded to supply drinks, except at Christmas and New Year,” so that many of the events were accompanied by tea and coffee only. Her house was used again for meetings during the Second World War, with attendees contributing rations. Cruickshank, *Octobriography*, 76 & 118.

²⁴ A report in *The Scotsman* claims that the congress had meant to go to London that year but that the London headquarters “were appalled at the financial expense and the amount of organisation required to hold it.” See “P.E.N. Congress: Edinburgh as 1934 Venue Co-operation needed,” *Scotsman*, 12 October 1931, 7; references to *The Scotsman* for this project were accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

itself at this time as a nation of developing international reputation and dramatic testimony of the development of European fascism, something that would provide all the branches of P.E.N. International with the first substantial threat to their credo of tolerance, friendliness and non-chauvinism.

The event itself was supported by a substantial book-length programme which provides detailed guidance and information on all the events.²⁵ Though the central congress events were held in the Assembly Hall in Edinburgh, concerts, dinners and other educational and social events, including a garden party at Holyroodhouse, were judiciously held in both Edinburgh and Glasgow in order to showcase Scotland's literary and cultural jewels.²⁶ MacDiarmid wrote scathingly about the "nuzzle-nuzzle" and "guzzle-guzzle" of these events and about the garden party

... at Holyrood
 Convened with Annie Swan and Harvey Wood
 And Däubler and Čapek exchanging views
 With 'Riff-Raff of the Scotsman and the *News*.'²⁷

The events also aimed to provide attendees with a taste of the varieties of Scottish culture and landscape. Planned outings included a visit to Edinburgh Castle, a tour of Queensferry and the Forth Bridge, but also further afield to Dryburgh Abbey and Abbotsford, with tours to Peebles, North Berwick and Tantallion Castle and Glasgow, with trips to the Cathedral, art galleries and beyond to the Trossachs and "Burns country." As Cunninghame Grahame and John Grierson put it in their welcome, "We shall take you to some of the places in Scotland hallowed by the memories of men who worthily maintained the traditions of Scottish Literature."²⁸

Included in the Congress programme were two essays treating "Scottish Literature in 1934" and "Modern Gaelic Literature."²⁹ The anonymous 20-page essay on "Scottish Literature" justified P.E.N.'s decision "in wisely selecting Scotland" for the congress by suggesting that Scotland, though "a

²⁵ *PEN XIIIth International Congress 17th-22nd June 1934* (Edinburgh: Travel Press), 4.

²⁶ Cruickshank notes that 'it 'was the first time, I believe, that any body other than the General Assembly if the Church of Scotland was allowed to hold a garden party there'. *Octobiography*, 93.

²⁷ MacDiarmid, "Welcome to the PEN Delegates," 1299..

²⁸ *PEN XIIIth International Congress*, 4. Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham (1852-1936) was a journalist, short story writer and politician who had diverse political allegiances: a Liberal MP, President of the Scottish Labour Party and founding member of the Scottish National Party in the 1930s.

²⁹ Although the latter is clearly authored by D.J. Macleod, the former remains anonymous: Compton Mackenzie and John Grierson are likely contenders.

comparatively small country,” was undergoing what some had “hailed as a ‘renaissance,’” and argued that arguing that recent Scottish literature represented a

spirit of experiment and even empiricism which in a new and amazing Europe is by no means peculiar to Scottish literary circumstances, being characteristic rather of Continental aesthetics as a whole.³⁰

Significantly, therefore, Scotland was identified as both a unique and distinctive culture with longstanding traditions including ballad poetry, folklore, Romanticism and mysticism which “colour the national thought,” as well as a culture influenced by a “harsh Puritanism.” The latter has “created a national literary outlook straitened and insular in its vision,” while also being energized but “scarcely endangered even by the most ebullient modernism” from Europe (*ibid.*, 34-35). It is important to note that the puritanism referred to here is framed in the past tense, chastened by the stirring promise of European art and culture, with the inference of a forward trajectory away from one towards the other. Yet the essay as a whole argues that, while the writers of early twentieth-century Scotland have produced “some great poems,” there are as yet “no poets of the first rank”: Scottish writers are more “notable in the department of the essay than in any other” John Grierson, Edwin and Willa Muir and William Power are all credited). New seams of experimentation in the novel are praised for the way they cast off “that spirit of reason and restraint which marks the Scottish cast of thought,” not to mention the spirit of the Kailyard (*ibid.*, 43, 45, 46).³¹

By contrast to the cultural outings and entertainment offered to delegates, and the anonymous essayist’s claim of “an early revival of art and letters in our midst” (*ibid.*, 32), the proceedings of the Congress itself present a very different picture. They reveal an urgent and turbulent engagement with European politics, specifically with the rise of European nationalisms and the potential threat they posed to freedom of speech, a topic which appears to have overtaken the home-grown agenda. Reports from the immediately preceding congresses of 1932 and 1933 contain evidence of mounting concerns about the suppression of literature; they had been raised in 1932 in Budapest, by the Austrian, German and Polish delegates and in H.G. Wells’s opening address, and again at the Dubrovnik

³⁰ Anonymous, “Scottish Literature in 1934,” 32..

³¹ The novels identified were mainly problem-centred Scottish social realist works, none now remaining in print, such as Ian McPherson’s *Land of Our Fathers* (1933), George Blake’s *Paper Money* (1928) and *Returned Empty* (1931), Christine Orr’s *Immortal Memory* (1933), and Frederick Niven’s *Mrs. Barry* (1933).

Congress of 1933.³² They were raised again in 1933 at the Dubrovnik Congress, where four German delegates withdrew in protest after Wells caused an “uproar” when he accepted two questions demanding that German delegates account for “the ill-treatment of German intellectuals and the burning of books” and denied the Germans’ request that he bar the left-wing Jewish writer Ernst Toller the right to speak to these; Austrian, Swiss and Dutch delegates also had to be persuaded to resume their seats.³³

Against this backdrop, the Edinburgh organisers must certainly have anticipated that similar issues would be pressed at the Scottish Congress. Willa Muir had reported on the 1932 Budapest Congress.³⁴ Edwin Muir, who was on the Edinburgh organizing committee, and J. Liddell Geddie, director and editor at W. & R. Chambers publishing, had represented Scotland in Dubrovnik and witnessed the debate there firsthand.³⁵ In March 1934, “The Provisional Committee for the Foundation of the Germany Library of the Burned Books” had been founded to collect works which had been “burned, censored and suppressed” by the Third Reich, to store and protect books belonging to German refugees, and to archive works by prominent Nazis.³⁶ The coming to power of Hitler in 1933, and the violent political division and censorship in Europe which accompanied it, make the pleasant reflections on cultural renaissance and garden parties in the 1934 congress booklet seem at best quaint and at worst parochial,

The September 1934 edition of *P.E.N. News* provides a very full picture of the Edinburgh congress proceedings divided into three reports, distinct in focus and style. The poet and art historian Horace Shipp offered

³² *P.E.N. News*, June 1932, 6; *P.E.N. News*, June 1933, 2-6..

³³ *P.E.N. News*, June 1933, 2-6. For a full account of Ernst Toller’s role in the expulsion of the German delegation, see “#100PENMembers No. 84: Ernst Toller,” at: <https://writersandfreeexpression.com/page/2/> (accessed 13 October 2021).

³⁴ Cruickshank reported that Muir had “sat on the floor in her hotel bedroom and ‘grat for the fate of central Europe,’” and also that the Muirs’ attendance at the Hungarian congress was financed anonymously, via her, by the American philanthropist and S.P.E.N. member, James Whyte: *Octobiography*, 84. Willa Muir’s letter to Helen Cruickshank of 26 May 1932 on her experience at the Hungarian Congress, is in P.H. Butter, ed., *Selected Letters of Edwin Muir* (London Hogarth Press, 1974), 72-76, and Muir’s horrific account of her experience at the Budapest congress, including her sense that it was “a cover for political intrigues”; see her *Belonging: a Memoir* (Glasgow: Kennedy and Boyd, 2008), 151.

³⁵ See Edwin Muir’s detailed report of the event, “P.E.N. Congress: Dispute Over Nazi Action, A Stormy Meeting,” *Scotsman*, 19 June 1933, 13.

³⁶ *P.E.N. News*, March 1934, 4. In the following issue, Charlotte Haldane announced the establishment of the library in Paris, through which “a complete picture can be obtained” of the Nazis’ “outlook and its consequences to contemporary authors whose opinions differ from it”: *P.E.N. News*, April 1934, 1.

a brief and somewhat whimsical impression piece which sidesteps the hard politics of “iron-bound resolutions” to confirm his satisfaction that “the transcendent values of P.E.N.—its ideals of friendship between peoples and of freedom and toleration—received an unfettered reconsecration” during the proceedings.³⁷ Though he noted that he found the city of Edinburgh “amazingly itself” and thus “remarkably foreign,” he was nonetheless impressed by the “strong national traditions and that sense of underlying seriousness” and “definite national individuality” he encountered, manifested in “so many people with a real interest in poetry.”

Shipp’s characterization of the congress as a string of “delightful days and pleasant functions” stands in sharp contrast with both the official report on the proceedings as a whole and the account provided of H.G. Wells’s presidential address. The official report is not attributed but Hermon Ould, the general secretary in 1934, is perhaps the most likely author. It acknowledged what would become a fundamental tension in the organisation between those delegates who complained that it “should not have spent so much time discussing Fascism, Hitlerism, Communism, political prisoners and the like” and the author’s own commitment to challenging institutions that “presume to interfere with the claim of responsible writers to freedom of utterance.”³⁸

The first item on the agenda, proposed by the English anti-War novelist Ernest Raymond, was a motion which brought this issue to the fore (and which not only took up the whole of the first day’s business, but spilled over to the next):

The P.E.N. stands for liberty of expression throughout the world and views with apprehension the continual attempts to encroach upon that liberty in the name of social security and international strategy. It affirms its belief that the necessary advance of the world towards a more highly organized political and economic order renders a free criticism of administrations and institutions imperative from all points of view.

The motion was supported by a range of international members including H.G. Wells, Ernst Toller, Raoul Auernheimer, and Catharine Dawson Scott, and it was carried nearly unanimously.³⁹ The sole dissenter was the Italian Futurist F.T. Marinetti, who had tried unsuccessfully to

³⁷ Horace Shipp, “With the P.E.N. in Scotland,” *P.E.N. News*, September 1934, 2.

³⁸ “XIIth International P.E.N. Congress Held in Scotland, June 17th to 22nd 1934,” *P.E.N. News*, September 1934, 3.

³⁹ Auernheimer was a Jewish Austrian journalist who would be arrested and taken to Dachau in 1938, though he was released the same year following the intervention of fellow P.E.N. member Emil Ludwig who persuaded the U.S. government to act on his behalf.

amend the motion, and the resolution was subsequently added to the P.E.N. rules.

Other motions included one from Emil Ludwig that “in the case of the imminence of war, to call together the delegates of the International P.E.N. Association in order to safeguard the freedom of expression and to guarantee that the principles of the P.E.N. be upheld,” but this was dropped “with the consent of the great majority of the delegates present” (*ibid.*, 4). French author and critic Benjamin Cremieux initiated a proposal for the establishment of the International Fund for Writers (now the P.E.N. Emergency Fund). Ernst Toller proposed a motion (which was passed) that the congress demand the release of all writers who had been imprisoned without trial by the National Socialist Government in Germany “for no other reason than that they had ... written books the intellectual content of which was not to the taste of the present regime.”⁴⁰ One of the most dramatic and revealing contributions to this motion came from Rudolf Olden who strongly supported Toller’s forceful condemnation of the Berlin P.E.N. centre’s collaboration with the Nazis.⁴¹ He begged delegates to take decisive action against the abuses of power in Germany (“the main issue which will determine the course of the world”), and he predicted that the Edinburgh P.E.N. Congress “would go down to history probably as futile and neither hot nor cold,” because it refused to act robustly.⁴²

The failure of the Congress to take stronger action reflected a core dilemma, the terms of which are also evident in H.G. Wells’s presidential address. While his tone may have been less condemnatory of the congress than Olden’s, Wells was certainly just as direct, turning almost immediately to address the “unexampled crisis” of the world and providing a chilling reminder to delegates that the friendliness of such cordial gatherings is thoroughly exposed when it is apparent that “someone has been left out, that a door has been barred.”⁴³ “Can we,” he asked, “hold our

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4. A minute’s silence would be held at the 1939 AGM of S.P.E.N. following the news of Toller’s suicide that year: see N.L.S. Acc.8560, no.4, and note 33 above.

⁴¹ Cruickshank records that S.P.E.N. had previously supported Toller by organising a private lecture tour for him in 1933. *Octobiography*, 93.

⁴² For an account of this speech, see “#100PENMembers, no. 93: Rudolf Olden,” at: <https://writersandfreeexpression.com/page/2/> (accessed 13 October 2021). This source notes Emil Ludwig’s upset over the poor translation of Olden’s words, though Ludwig believed that the “trembling” figure and voice of the man was a sufficiently powerful symbol of “these poor writers and thinkers who are exiled.” For a local account, see “P.E.N. Politics,” *Scotsman*, 21 June 1934, 10.

⁴³ H.G. Wells, ‘Presidential Address at the Congress’, *P.E.N. News*, September 1934, 5. Wells noted the “difficulty in keeping the door open for Toller” at the Dubrovnik congress the previous year.

banquet and disregard the fact that there are maltreated bodies lying on the threshold?" Wells went on to question what the very function of P.E.N. should be; was it, he asked, to be a "tourist agency—an organisation for introducing respectable writers to useful scenery—a special branch of the hotel industry?" (*ibid.*, 5). The phrase uncomfortably evokes Shipp's phrase about "delightful days and pleasant functions" and draws attention to very acute challenges that the Edinburgh Congress brought to a head. These challenges have shaped and troubled P.E.N.'s identity and continuance ever since about what the limits should be to political neutrality and to free speech when that speech itself threatens the inclusive, internationalist, non-sectarian ethos of the organisation.

In the middle of his speech Wells read at length from a letter from the Austrian writer Fritz Brügel who declared that "mental liberty has ceased to exist in Austria" and that authors were being detained in German style concentration camps (*ibid.*, 6). Wells went on to take a proposed resolution from Sonka (Hugo Sonnenschein) "as an author hunted by Austria" that the XIIth Congress "in connection with the League of Nations, creates an office with the view of supporting and safeguarding the rights of ... such authors as are persecuted for their writing." "Can we," Wells asked, "fight and shall we fight on the issue—or shall we pass on the other side?" He acknowledged that these difficult questions, which also include challenging Italian P.E.N. about whether it "is a comprehensive or an exclusive club" (which it had refused to do), are unprecedented in the history of the organisation and that the congress is "perplexed." Wells's summary of this state of perplexed paralysis, accompanied by an as yet uncommitted resolve to "accept fresh responsibility and play a world-wide role," captures, along with Olden's plea, the sense that the Edinburgh Congress marked a the turning point for P.E.N. as a whole (*ibid.*, 7). Wells asked "Have I your agreement?," and, though the transcript does not register whether he receives the assent of the floor, the developments of the subsequent years suggest that he did.⁴⁴

It is clear, therefore, that the Edinburgh Congress of 1934, perhaps more than any in the previous history of P.E.N., threw into relief the prickly question asked at the Scottish P.E.N. debate of 1929 chaired by William Power, about whether the function of the organisation was to provide congenial social events or to make direct interventions to improve or even safeguard freedom of speech and, indeed, life. Undoubtedly Olden felt the Congress had failed in this latter challenge, hampered by its commitment to political neutrality, yet it is also indisputable that several

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7. For a more detailed account of Wells's speech, see "Freedom of Literature: Mr H.G. Wells and Danger of Political Persecution," *The Scotsman*, 19 June 1934, 11.

key material outcomes emerged from the early 1930s, if not from this Congress alone. The approval of Storm Jameson's and Herman Ould's plan for the Refugee Fund, support for establishing the Library of the Burned Books in Paris, and the rejection of Marinetti's proposal to hold the 1936 congress in fascist Italy, all show that the delegates' concern with political developments.⁴⁵ The delegates backed decisively motions responding to the threats to writers' freedom from the iterations of national socialism. This backing was accompanied by direct condemnations of any organisation or government not based on the principle of keeping the door open to all. The inevitable tension here, and the central challenge for P.E.N. in this period, was that P.E.N. chapters which practiced or endorsed exclusion, persecution or censorship must find themselves facing a closed door, excluded by P.E.N. itself, an awkward inevitability which has lost none of its irony today.

More pragmatically, the 1934 Edinburgh congress marks a decisive and positive turning point in the fortunes of Scottish P.E.N. itself, initiating a boost to membership and delivering a significant financial lift. Hosting a P.E.N. congress required considerable investment, and the organising committee, on which William Power and Helen Cruickshank were central, had set a fund-raising target of £3000. Thousands of circulars were distributed to publicize fund-raising events in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Inverness.⁴⁶ Despite the scale of congress activities, the end result showed a budget surplus of £1,102 (equivalent to around £55,000 in 2021).⁴⁷ Some £200 of this had to be repaid to guarantors and subscribers, but in 1935 a Constitution of Trust was set up to invest the remaining £900.⁴⁸

The Trust specified that the five trustees (Herbert Grierson, John Henderson, John Erskine, George Pratt Insh and Edward Albert) "shall not

⁴⁵ On Storm Jameson and the the refugee fund, see "#100PENMembers No. 10: Storm Jameson," and "PEN past and PEN future and Refugees," on <https://writersandfreexpression.com>, page 2 and the post of 26 February 2018 respectively (accessed 13 and 14 October 2021)..

⁴⁶ Cruickshank, *Octobiography*, 84. A list of the congress committee membership is printed in "P.E.N. Congress: Scottish Committee Meets," *Scotsman*, 19 December 1932, 11.

⁴⁷ A report from 1934 quotes William Power's claim that £5000 was required to host the event. "This Year's P.E.N. Congress: Putting Scotland on Cultural and Spiritual Map," *Scotsman*, 14 April 1934, 14. Power had claimed earlier that £7000 would be required, arguing that the badly needed "boost-up" to Scotland's reputation and economy could be worth £250,000: "Value of P.E.N. Congress: Worth £250,000 in Publicity," *Scotsman*, 2 November 1933, 6. Those who subscribed were acknowledged in "P.E.N. International Congress in Scotland, List of Subscribers," *Scotsman*, 21 April 1934, 16..

⁴⁸ See "P.E.N. Congress Surplus of £1102," *Scotsman*, 29 October 1934, 14.

be liable for the depreciation in or losses incurred upon investments made by them” and listed the activities upon which the funds should be spent.⁴⁹ Such activities are delimited as those which “will develop a greater understanding of and interest in Scotland and Scottish Literature,” with examples given including the invitation of “distinguished foreign men and women of letters to lecture in different parts of Scotland, or to assist financially, Scottish men and women of letters to accept invitations to accept invitations to lecture abroad.”⁵⁰

The remit of the trust, therefore, honoured the spirit of the congress with its internationalist emphasis on maintaining dialogue with writers of other nations, without any specific mention of providing financial assistance to the persecuted and exiled writers who had been the subject of so much heated discussion during the congress. For more than a decade, the trust would support important activities during a period of widespread economic hardship and war when it might otherwise have been impossible to fund travel, provide grants or finance invited speaker events.⁵¹ After the war, as a handwritten note in the Constitution of Trust indicates, the remaining trust funds were used to support the next Scottish congress, held in 1950.⁵²

At the 1936 Annual General Meeting, R.D. Macleod, honorary secretary and treasurer, reported a rise in active membership to 184 (36 new members and 13 resignations), though he also alluded to “upwards of

⁴⁹ “Constitution of Trust,” Acc.9364, no.11. Minutes of 29 October 1948 indicate that this £900 was reinvested in 2½ % Defence Bonds until 1948, when the principal was transferred to the 1950 Congress. Cf. Minutes of the AGM, 18 October, 1950. N.L.S. Acc.8560, no.4.

⁵⁰ “Constitution of Trust.”

⁵¹ The minutes of the AGM for 18th October 1950 indicate that “The Trust Fund ... the sum we inherited from the 1934 Congress now no longer exists, having been transferred, as authorized, to Mr Anderson, treasurer for the 1950 Congress”: N.L.S. Acc.8560, no.4.

⁵² The establishment of the Trust appears to have introduced a more general professionalism with regard to roles and finances within S.P.E.N. Macleod had taken over as secretary mid-year from Cruickshank’s immediate successor as secretary, Peter Taylor (*Scotsman*, 29 October 1934, 14; 13 May 1935, 13), and submitted his own resignation at the 1936 A.G.M., because he found “the job is too considerable to be carried through on a voluntary basis”: Minutes of the AGM, 9 May 1936. N.L.S. Acc.8560, no.4. But 1936 was the year which also saw Eric Linklater and Compton Mackenzie resign their membership, because, in Parnell’s words, they felt the society’s “involvement in politics was too acute” and had taken them “too far to the left”: Michael Parnell, *Eric Linklater: a Critical Biography* (London: John Murray, 1984), 205.

40 on the roll ... in default for periods up to four years.”⁵³ So although engagement with the organisation was strong, the economic impact of the depression era took its toll on many writers who were struggling to make a living never mind keep up with club subscriptions. The meeting proposed that the S.P.E.N. committee establish a benevolent fund to assist members in hardship, something which appears to have operated informally until the establishment of the Emergency Fund in 1974.⁵⁴

By the start of war support was being extended further to support other writers who, like Toller, had been forced into exile by the war. In 1940 the AGM minutes note that “The PEN Trust should be called upon to pay for the visits of exiled writers now living in this country,” indeed the minutes of the following year indicate that the majority of their 18 meetings had been “confined to the entertainment of distinguished exiles” for whom the Trust covered travelling expenses.⁵⁵ S.P.E.N. business is plainly impacted by the deepening of war with no minutes being available for the 1942 AGM and very little business to report in 1943 except to note that the “financial position showed a small credit,” even though membership had dropped to 100 with around 50 active members.⁵⁶ By 1945 it was agreed to waive the honorariums claimed by serving officials, to increase subscriptions and introduce both an entrance fee and a voluntary donation for receipt of *Pen News*.⁵⁷ But while membership steadied at just over 109, 29 of those were reported to be in financial arrears, evidence that widespread financial insecurity was being experienced by many of the members on which the organisation depended for its own financial security.

One case of financial hardship from 1936, the year Macleod proposed S.P.E.N. should initiate its benevolent fund, demonstrates both the necessity and limitations of S.P.E.N.’s ability to support writers and the long-lasting impact the case had on the organisation. The case file, held in the British Library, begins in 1929 with an application from C.P. Duff to H.J.C. Marshall in the Prime Minister’s office to award the poverty-

⁵³ Honorary Secretary’s Report, 3rd September 1935-30th April 1936, Minutes of the 9th AGM of Scottish P.E.N., 9 May 1936, N.L.S. Acc.8560, no.4.

⁵⁴ *S.P.E.N. Newsletter*, 15 May 1974, N.L.S. Acc.9364, no.13. The fund was established ‘to support writers who are prevented from exercising their profession, also for political or ideological reasons, and are therefore unable to provide a livelihood for themselves and their families’.

⁵⁵ Minutes of the AGM, October 1940 and the AGM of 1941 (no date), N.L.S. Acc.8560, no.4..

⁵⁶ *Ibid*. These minutes also indicate that the black-out restrictions meant that separate meetings had to be held in Edinburgh in Glasgow which clearly had an impact on turnout.

⁵⁷ AGM Minutes of 8 December 1945, N.L.S. Acc.8560, no.4.

stricken expatriate Scottish novelist Frederick John Niven a pension in the Civil List.⁵⁸ The Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, was a fellow-Scot, but the application was rejected. Niven's case was referred instead to the Royal Bounty Fund and, since Niven had lived in Canada since 1920, to the Canadian Government. There is no evidence of success from these sources either, but the file also contains Niven's application in 1929 to the yet another possible source of support, the Royal Literary Fund.

This fourth application included a letter from Niven's wife Pauline detailing the recent breakdown in his health, but the chief documentation of support came through Scottish P.E.N. This led off with a letter from Iain F. Anderson, Cruikshank's successor as Honorary Secretary of S.P.E.N., who wrote that he had been "instructed" by the S.P.E.N. president, William Power, to ask whether the Royal Literary Fund could grant a "precept of Annuity," rather than a fixed sum, as would be more standard practice, in order to recognise Niven's "long, consistent and meritorious contribution to literature ... undoubtedly recognised through out (sic) Britain and the Colonies."⁵⁹ Anderson's letter was accompanied by one from Sylvia Lind urging the Royal Literary Fund to make a "substantial grant" to Niven, "the largest possible"; a cable from John Murray Gibson (a fellow Scottish writer and emigré to Canada) pressing the committee to consider the impact of Niven's novel, *The Flying Years* (1935) and the "Mrs Barrie Classics"; a direct letter of support from William Power himself; and indications of further support from J. M. Barrie and Lord Tweedsmuir (John Buchan), Governor-General of Canada.⁶⁰

Despite this wall of support for Niven from so many established figures among the membership of Scottish P.E.N., the panel of the Royal Literary Fund were evidently much less convinced of the quality, significance and consistency of Niven's literary achievement. One panel member, L.B.B. Speed, commented that, having been sent copies of Niven's books, he could find in the *Old Soldier* (1936) "neither plot nor interest," and he added a less diplomatic handwritten postscript suggesting that "the case suffers from an overdose of Scottish enthusiasm."⁶¹ The Niven case speaks of the sharp divergence between Scottish and English judges in the literary and cultural value placed on Niven's work; he was clearly held in considerable esteem north of the border for his engagement with Scottish

⁵⁸ Letter from C.P. Duff to H.J.C. Marshall, Prime Minister's Office, 15 November 1929. British Library, No3573, Vol.2.

⁵⁹ Letter from Iain F. Anderson, 17 June 1936, British Library, No3573, Vol.2.

⁶⁰ Letter from L.B.B. Speed, Royal Literary Fund, 4 August 1936, British Library, No3573, Vol.2.

⁶¹ Letter from L.B.B. Speed, Royal Literary Fund, 23 October 1936, British Library, No3573, Vol.2.

landscape and literary history, seen by many as an successor to Stevenson,, yet that very Scottish engagement was a cause for his marginalisation in the eyes of the London-based literary funding body. Although the fund paid out £150 and another £100 in May 1940, Niven continued to live in poverty and ill health until his death in 1944.⁶² The fact that S.P.E.N. set up the annual Niven award in 1949 is testimony not only to their investment in Niven's literary achievements, but also to the recognition of the distinctive qualities and needs of Scottish writers who might not meet the selection criteria of British prizes and subsidies.

This diverse evidence from the early years of Scottish P.E.N. documents an organisation which, from the outset, addressed the necessity of distinctive organisational structures within the broader P.E.N. organisation, better reflecting Scotland's linguistic and geographic dispersal and diversity. Although Christopher Grieve is widely and correctly credited with initiating the founding of the centre, his presence, if not his influence, was short-lived. His successor as secretary, Helen Cruickshank, has emerged as the greater shaping influence in S.P.E.N.'s early years, particularly in steering the organisation towards its successful bid to host the 1934 international P.E.N. Congress.

The tumultuous and transformative years from 1934-1936 are crucial for understanding the establishment of Scottish P.E.N. They provided opportunities to internationalise Scotland's literary and political culture and to promote its international profile. From its outset, S.P.E.N. had been unsettled by a concern that it should not merely become a cosy addition to Edinburgh and Glasgow's middle-class society of letters. The 1934 Congress offered robust counter-evidence, as well as the financial means and intellectual confidence to define a more interventionist and ambitious agenda. For Helen Cruickshank, William Power and others (often for a host of different reasons), it became increasingly important to channel activities towards the consolidation of Scotland's reputation abroad as a distinct and autonomous literary culture, to strengthen and extend its journalistic, academic and publishing institutions and to disrupt any complacency that might lead to insularity or parochialism. The establishment in 1936 of a hardship fund provided a means of supporting writers with a distinct and meaningful connection to Scottish literature and culture that might not be recognised elsewhere.

The 1934 Congress was also significant for P.E.N. as a whole. Confronted by the rise to power of the German Nazi party and the spread of European fascism, P.E.N. aimed to be both morally clear and politically non-partisan. It defined its mission as an organisation promoting freedom of expression and condemning exclusion or discrimination against any

⁶² Letter from Iain Anderson, 7 August 1936, British Library, No3573, Vol.2.

group, while avoiding direct statements that condemned specific political ideologies and parties. As Wells put it, P.E.N. could never ignore the “maltreated” or those against whom a door has been “barred,” yet it could not align itself with a specific political party. The Scottish Congress of 1934 is a crucial part of the organisation’s early history during which these fundamental principles were tested and advanced.

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