

# Neil Gunn Writing Competition 2018-2019

## Secondary School Section

### Comments by judge Colin Ferguson

The secondary school section was based on a quote from Neil Gunn's 'Highland River' - ***'From the high summit, the solitary figure would watch the dawn come up'***.

While there were only 33 entries from 6 schools, they demonstrated a diverse range of literary style and subject matter; and, some outstanding writing.

My fellow judge, Sya, and I first of all read all of the entries ourselves before meeting to discuss our respective shortlists. Out of a total of 9 entries on our individual lists, 6 were common to both; and, interestingly, we both came up with the same choices for 1st, 2nd and 3rd places. While our individual choices for the Highly Commended and Commended varied slightly, we again found it easy to reach agreement on the final selection.

To ensure fairness, the entries are given to the judges with no names of entrants or their schools attached. After the judging was complete, we were then told where each of the winners came from and discovered 3 different schools were represented.

Before commenting on each piece individually, I would like to congratulate all the winners of both prizes and certificates for producing such enjoyable and interesting work. Congratulations and thanks also to the teachers who have taken time to encourage them.

I would now like to invite each of the winners to come out after a short description of their work is read out.

#### Prize List and Comments

##### Commended (in alphabetical order)

*'From the high summit, the solitary figure would watch the dawn come up .....*' by **Sarah-Ann Corcoran, Dingwall Academy**. From her opening paragraph, Sarah-Ann captures the reader's attention in this tale of loss and desperation. With careful attention to detail, she maintains our empathy with her central character all the way to the tragic conclusion.

Also commended is *'Metamorphosis'* by **Christy Macpherson, Charleston Academy**. Christy has created a poem which not only flows beautifully from beginning to end but has a strong emotional impact as death approaches for one bed-ridden character while the narrator watches over her.

## Highly Commended (alphabetical order)

'*The Watcher's Bride*' by **Eve Flugel, Charleston Academy** is another poem which caught our eye for its original and thought provoking approach, and some excellent imagery of natural features to create a real, or was it imaginary, sense of place and the passing of time.

The other Highly commended is '*The Monster in my Dreams*' by **Meg Leaver, also from Charleston Academy**. This is a well-written tale of an abusive relationship, that maintains tension from beginning to end. The repetition of the words '***I loved you. You left me***' at the end of each paragraph was a clever device, made even more powerful by the ending '***I loved you. You left me. Thank God***'.

## Prize Winners

In **3rd place** is **Iona Ramsey, of Dingwall Academy** with her entry, titled '*Accused*'. Iona has created a strong, historical tale of witchcraft in the Pendle Hill area of Yorkshire. We feel great empathy for the narrator as she listens to the '***evil accusations spew forth from this man of God against my neighbours***' and feels '***a cold shudder run down my spine .... and a cruel smile played on his lips.***' A chilling, well written tale, ending '***I looked up in horror to see his mangled hand reaching out towards me***'.

**2nd place** goes to **Nya Gibson-Proudfoot, Fortrose Academy** for '*Cup of Tea on Christmas*'. This is a very impressive description of old age and of the life-long love between an old man, now separated from his wife who is in a Care Home. Its strength is in the detail which Nya employs. Quote '***My chair, there as ever. her chair, too, only empty. Looking at her chair, in this room, with this fireplace. Her mug, warm in my hand. I can feel her here, her arms around me on the settee. In the place where we lived, loved...married.***' This is a very mature piece of writing which never falls into the potential trap of sentimentality.

**1st Place** On my first reading of the winning entry, '*Ruined Broch (Clachtoll)*', by **Tomos Dargie, from Fortrose Academy**, my reaction was '**Wow!**' and I know my fellow judge, Sya felt exactly the same. Tomos has written a poem which flows beautifully from beginning to end and captures the essence of the north-west Highlands through a series of vivid images. His opening verse reads: '***A landscape of salt and peat, Rust water flowing down to the sea; the Atlantic swell roars. Clachtoll. Time has worn down the stone, bleeding to the hunger of the abrading waves***'. Without a wasted word, this is a great descriptive poem on the landscape and the forces that shaped it – both natural and human. It ends, '***At last all the pieces, the whole pattern of time interlaced. And once from the high summit, the solitary figure would watch the dawn come up. Knowing this landscape of bitter soil and sha t te re d stone would outlive us all.***' Well done Tomos for a tremendous piece of work – Norman McCaig would have been proud of it.

Incidentally, Tomos was Commended for a poem he wrote for the 2017 competition. I believe this is the first time in the secondary competition that someone has been a

winner in more than one year. An inspiration, perhaps, for those of you who came close this time.

**School Winner** – with 19 of the 33 entries, three winners of Highly Commended or Commended certificates and two others on the short list, the judges choice for the school prize is **Charleston Academy**.

Congratulations once again not only to the winners of prizes and certificates but to the schools who made the effort to enter and provided us with some richly varied creative writing. Thank you all.