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1. Alliance of Literary Societies AGM Weekend 2019 – Nuneaton’s Dairymaid

We must admit, the prospect of a weekend in May at Nuneaton did not have the same attraction as some previous Association of Literary Society AGM conventions. For instance, we have fond memories of covering the Royal Mile of Edinburgh (hosted by the Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon societies) and a magical walk on the moors at Haworth (with the Brontë Society). However, over the weekend of 18–19 May 2019, there was much to celebrate about Nuneaton.

It helped that the town is bucking the trend of some town centres: half closed and depressed, suffering the ravages of the internet trading age. We found that on a Saturday in Nuneaton, market stalls stretch along both sides of the pedestrianised Market Place and Newdigate Street and there is a cheery bustle in the town. The choice of the Town Hall as the AGM venue was inspired. There was the opportunity to see and use the modern facilities of Nuneaton and Bedworth’s Borough Council Chamber (home from home for local government councillors like myself).

We were given the chance to visit the Mayor’s Parlour and see the long association of Nuneaton with all three military services, and to examine an impressive trophy and silver collection. We learned from the Serjeant-at-Arms that there are two civic chains (one for day wear and one for special occasions). The other attraction of the Mayor’s Parlour is the montage of pictures to celebrate the bicentenary of George Eliot’s birth (November 1819), donated by the George Eliot Fellowship.

As many readers will know, George Eliot was the pen name of Mary Ann Evans, one of Victorian England’s leading novelists. Her first stories appeared in magazines and were followed by novels including *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Silas Marner* (1861) and *Middlemarch* (1871–2). Her work was popular with critics and the public alike, and in later years her novels were especially valued for their detailed portrayals of English rural life.

Members of the George Eliot Fellowship still wince and smile at the question from Nuneatonians: ‘What was he famous for?’ Some of those, I am sure, will be convinced ‘he’ is named after the pub or the hospital that exist in the town. Evans’s adoption of a male pen name probably stemmed from a number of factors, including a wish to be judged as an author rather than specifically as a ‘woman author’, and the desire to maintain her personal privacy.

Social pride may have had a bearing on the story of the dairymaid’s glove, as told by Professor Kathryn Hughes, a Vice President of the Fellowship. We learned from her that George Eliot, for a number of years, told acquaintances that her right hand was bigger than the left, as it had become more muscular from years of her churning cheese and butter. Her family, in particular her nephew, Revd Frederick Evans, Rector of Bedworth, vehemently denied the larger right hand claim. The suspicion was that it drew attention to the humble beginnings of the Evans family.
Kathryn Hughes had a show-stopping exhibit for the conclusion of her talk: a right-hand glove belonging to George Eliot which had been given to a friend. It was eventually passed on to Kathryn and the Fellowship. We were able to see for ourselves that it was not unusually large at all. In fact, it was tiny.

John Burton of the George Eliot Fellowship gave an entertaining history of some George Eliot commemorations. One hundred years ago, there had been a number of features on the author in Nuneaton’s daily newspaper (now defunct and replaced by a myriad of websites), and there were commemorative postcards (people buy these rarely now, with e-mails and texts cheaper and quicker). He also spoke of the 18th century schoolhouse at Chilvers Coton, the village where the Evans family once lived. The council intended to demolish it, but members of the George Eliot Fellowship and others campaigned to save it. It is now the Heritage Centre and a good starting point to visit the Church of All Saints (where Mary Ann Evans was baptised) and the churchyard, which houses the graves of some members of the Evans family.

In the AGM itself, Linda Curry (of the John Clare Society) was re-elected as Chairman, Marty Smith (Johnson Society (Lichfield)) as Secretary and Julie Shorland (Jane Austen Society) as Treasurer. Claire Harman addressed the meeting as ALS President. She highlighted the Libraries Connected website, which supports the use and continued opening of libraries in the current, funding-pressured environment.

Another guest speaker was Emma Claire Sweeney, who spoke of the ‘Secret Sisterhood’: friendships between notable women authors. She had discovered that Anne Sharp had been a critical friend to Jane Austen on her writing output, and Mary Taylor had been constructively challenging of Charlotte Brontë’s views on the role of women in society as represented in her novels. It was thought by some that Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf were bitterest rivals. In fact, although they were outwardly critical of each other, they were supportive friends and confidantes, exchanging thoughts and even gifts. Finally, towards the end of George Eliot’s writing life, she had Harriet Beecher Stowe as an encouraging colleague.

At the end of the AGM, there were dramatic extracts by Sudden Impulse Theatre Company, who have staged a number of adaptations of George Eliot’s works, including a highly successful production of *Felix Holt*, which they took to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. They are currently preparing a musical version of *Silas Marner*.

Saturday evening involved a dinner and readings at Bedworth Civic Hall. On Sunday, there was an opportunity to meet at Chilvers Coton Heritage Centre, cross to the church and grounds (see above) and then onwards to the village of Astley. This entailed visits to a medieval church which has links with the Evans family; some descriptions of the church appear in Eliot’s work. We had a view of the Landmark Trust’s award-winning refurbishment of Astley Castle and there was a trip to the biggest second-hand bookshop in the Midlands, Astley Book Farm, a perfect finish to the weekend.

*Colin and Donna Greatorex*

*Johnson Society (Lichfield)*
2. London Library Tour for ALS Members

A free tour of the London Library for members of the ALS will be held on Friday, 25 October 2019 from 4-5.30pm.

We look forward to welcoming you.

The London Library is one of the world’s great lending libraries, founded by Thomas Carlyle and opened on 3 May 1841. Its extraordinary collection contains over one million books and periodicals dating from 1700 to the present day, arranged on open access shelves and almost all of which can be borrowed by members. The borrowing collection is complemented by extensive online resources giving remote access to hundreds of additional periodicals and databases.

In addition, the Library houses a collection of 40,000 rare books and pamphlets which are held in safe storage. These include a 1611 King James Bible, a first edition of The Origin of Species and a 500-year old original print copy of Martin Luther’s 95 theses.

The Library has been based in St James’s Square in the heart of London for most of its existence, but its single door façade gives little sense of the scale of what’s inside. Seven buildings have been knocked into one and an elegant, panelled and galleried Reading Room combines with RIBA award winning design and multi-storey Victorian iron-grilled bookstacks to create a memorably atmospheric centre for reading, writing and the sharing of ideas.

The Library has been formative in the life and work of many writers: Charles Dickens wrote *A Tale of Two Cities* with London Library books personally sent to him in a cart by Thomas Carlyle; over a century later Sebastian Faulks wrote *Charlotte Gray* with books sent over from the Library by air courier. A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* is set in the London Library’s Reading Room and Bram Stoker used books from the Library to research *Dracula*.

If you wish to attend the free London Library tour on 25 October from 4-5.30p.m., please contact Marty Ross (email: martyross73@gmail.com; or by post to 8 Waters Edge, Handsacre, Rugeley, Staffs. WS15 4HP). Please include the name of your society and a mobile phone number. Numbers are restricted to 20, so it will be first come, first served.

2. Nottingham’s status as a UNESCO City of Literature

Since 2004, UNESCO has designated 180 Cities of Literature, Music, Film, Crafts and Folk Arts, Design, Gastronomy and Media Arts - which in total, constitute the UNESCO Creative Cities Network. Nottingham was awarded the UNESCO designation as a City of Literature in December 2015 on account of the city’s literary heritage, its international outlook, its burgeoning diverse writing community, and its commitment to improving literacy across the city. Winning the UNESCO designation took a lot of hard work; work demonstrating that Nottingham and Nottinghamshire is full of diverse voices and talent. Many writers have been influenced by Nottingham, and many have, in turn, left their mark. From the heritage of Byron, Lawrence and Sillitoe, to the proliferation of today’s reading and writing scheme, the literary conversation in Nottingham is a roiling cacophony.

We share the UNESCO designation with only 27 other Cities of Literature, including Dublin, Reykjavik, Barcelona, Prague and Seattle, to name just a few. Being in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network is an invitation to a challenge, and a major responsibility to engage with member cities and foster our capacity to work better with culture and creativity. The international network meets twice a year to share plans, best practices and collaborate on projects all year round. Some of the most exciting exchanges are about the creative ways cities are giving literature a spotlight, engaging people with literature out in the community — on the streets, at markets, on buildings, in schools, parks and playgrounds. We are playing our part; activating people’s imaginations and showing how literature is essential to our lives through our *City of Literature Young Ambassadors* programme. Fourteen Young Ambassadors play a fantastic role fostering and building a culture of reading for pleasure across the city. They are exploring what it means to be a UNESCO City of Literature, unearthing uplifting stories, attending events, and interviewing writers. We are also working in partnership with the D.H Lawrence Birthplace Museum on *Eastwood Comics* – a project inspiring young writers and artists to create graphic stories inspired by the life and works of world-renowned author D.H Lawrence. The young writers’ research will also take in the social and cultural history of Eastwood, where Lawrence was born in 1885. During the project, 700 further young people will learn about the author and his birthplace by taking part in activities inspired by the young writers’ research. We will showcase the project at our forthcoming Heritage Learning Symposium in November 2019.

But it’s not all about inventing fun literary happenings. UNESCO has 17 Sustainable Development Goals — such as quality education, reduced inequalities, peace and justice — which the UNESCO Cities of Literature are charged with working toward. Our Nottingham
mission is to *Build a Better World with Words.* Freedom of expression must be celebrated, child literacy must be improved and a culture of listening to diverse voices and criticism must be cultivated. Crucially, Nottingham has an important role to play in bringing together the disparate parts of our world at a time when many seek to divide us. We need writers and we need groups organised to publish, promote, present, and connect writers, because literature helps us understand each other.

*Sandeep Mahal*
Director of Nottingham UNESCO City of Literature

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**Our Past, Our Stories, Our Future Symposium Day**

Join Nottingham UNESCO City of Literature on Thursday 28th November 2019 from 10am to 4pm at Nottingham Conference Centre for a special cross-sector space in which to explore ideas and share practice, learn new things and creatively engage with young people. We will bring together curators, educators, artists, teachers and young producers to engage with local heritage, share experiences of creative heritage learning programmes and youth-engagement initiatives. The Learning Symposium will place an emphasis on discovery and learning, through which participants will:

- Explore and debate important issues and provocations in heritage learning through themed panel discussions with professionals and young people
- Explore two carousels of 5 ground-breaking literary heritage learning programmes for young people
- Connect, collaborate and contribute creatively
- Celebrate the launch of Eastwood Comics with student creators.

The Learning Symposium will be of immense help to anyone involved in managing or delivering literary heritage or cultural learning programme. We shall reflect upon successes and challenges and leave with a better understanding of the future possibilities open to us. Most of all, we shall seek to empower you to connect and collaborate.

The full programme and speakers will be announced in September 2019, and the event includes all refreshments and a networking lunch. Tickets are £34.99 each and can be purchased via Eventbrite - [BOOK YOUR PLACE](#). For more information, or if you have any questions, please contact [sandeep@nottmcityoflit.org](mailto:sandeep@nottmcityoflit.org)
3. LitHouses Conference

In 2002 Cumbrian literature professor Terry McCormick conceived a project where those responsible for the country's literary homes and museums might form a group, 'wherein, together, they would prosper.' Similar groups existed all across Europe and Terry was convinced it was something that should be explored in Great Britain. In 2003, a group of British houses and museums – among them, Keats House, Shandy Hall, the Cowper and Newton Museum and Burns Cottage visited the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-upon-Avon for an exploratory meeting. The LitHouses Group was born.

The group’s intention was to ‘celebrate the jewels in the crown of Britain’s literary heritage’. A pattern of two meetings a year was adopted. At a smaller meeting in the summer, core group members discuss progress and plan the second, larger, autumn meeting. This takes the form of a conference, aimed specifically at tackling issues relevant to all literary houses and museums.

From the first annual conference in 2004, a comprehensive network has been established and the support and networking opportunities it affords are a valuable resource. Members have developed a trusting environment in which to exchange information and ideas, and the LitHouses group gives all members the confidence to stretch themselves: spending time at each other’s venues, benchmarking, comparing problems, discussing best practice and legislation compliance, and sharing successes. The LitHouses network helps members to do justice to the extraordinary heritage of which they are privileged guardians and proud promoters.

While the core membership numbers around 30, every literary home or museum in Great Britain is considered a member of the LitHouses group. ‘Active’ members (those listed with links to their website on the LitHouses website) are those who attend the annual conference in any one year. Meetings are held in every corner of the country and are hosted by LitHouses members.

The LitHouses annual conference welcomes people from outside the group, and their expertise and ideas, and provides a forum to share knowledge and experience of the topic under discussion. In 2019 the theme of the conference is ‘Celebrating our Champions: Members, Friends and Societies’ and it will be held at Brantwood House, Coniston, on Friday, 15th November, to tie in with Ruskin’s 200th anniversary year.

Henry Lytton Cobbold, the current resident and custodian of Knebworth House in Hertfordshire, has been the facilitator of the group since its inception. Knebworth was the home of his great-great-great-grandfather Edward Bulwer-Lytton, the prolific 19th century author of The Last Days of Pompeii and the words, ‘The pen is mightier than the sword.’

Active membership is encouraged, with membership fees set at £35 annually. Subscriptions run from September 1st. As with the ALS, active members can participate in hosting the annual conference, presenting a great opportunity for literary societies/houses to promote their author. With this year’s theme being particularly appropriate to literary societies, we encourage all societies with house or museum connections to consider joining the LitHouses group and, if possible, attend the conference.

To find out more, please visit the website www.lithouses.org Or email info@lithouses.org
LitHouses social media links are: Twitter: The LitHouses Group @LitHouses
And Facebook: www.facebook.com/LitHouses
4. Walks with Authors

#Go Crocketteering in Galloway.

In the spring edition I wrote of S.R.Crockett: ‘As the father of literary tourism in the area it is amazing that one still has to work so hard to get him ‘recognised’ at home’, and this is something that has been occupying my mind for a long time. Then I was struck with ‘a good idea’. It’s a curse, I have them all the time. But this one was a ‘really good idea’ which meant I should follow it.

Sparing you the days of work researching and writing Crockett quotes on 160 slates, I’ll fast forward you to June 26th. The project ‘launched’ at the Laurieston Memorial from where 160 ‘quote’ slates are making their way across the Galloway countryside by an army of ‘slatelayers’ who are tasked with finding just the right place to lay them.

In the process I fulfilled a decades long dream and laid two slates high in the hills at Loch Enoch. This was a very personal ‘walk with an author’ and the destination more than lived up to the promise of the quotes.

From east to west, coast to countryside, in towns and villages, slates are popping up like mushrooms. There are charts and an online map and people are encouraged to find the slates, take pictures of them, and share on social media. It’s like a combination of orienteering, Munro bagging and Banksy.

It’s a bit of fun for the summer, but the slates are organic and waterproof, so Crockett’s legacy will be available in Galloway for months (if not years) to come. And most of all, it’s the kind of tribute which would have amused Crockett. It’s hard to get people to read 19th century fiction these days, but perhaps coming across a strange and interesting quote in the landscape will spark the interest of locals and tourists alike to find out more.
You can find out more about #GoCrocketteering at the Galloway Raiders website www.gallowayraiders.co.uk or on our social media pages.

Cally Phillips, Galloway Raiders

6. News from Societies

Norman Nicholson Festival, July 29-30 2019, Millom, Cumbria

‘But there on a shelf
In the warm corner of my dormer window
A pot geranium flies its bright balloon...’

The dormer window is still there, and so, too, is a pot geranium. One of the highlights of the Norman Nicholson Society’s first two-day festival came when visitors to Nicholson’s house entered the room which was his bedroom and workspace for most of his life, to hear an audio recording of the poet himself reading The Pot Geranium, one of his best-known works.

There is something powerful about being in the very place where ideas turned into words and words became poetry, and to hear Nicholson’s own voice had a striking effect on everyone, from T.S. Eliot prize-winner Sean O’Brien to Norman’s cousin Doreen, from people who had travelled long distances, to locals who walk down St George’s Terrace every day.

The chance to visit Nicholson’s house was just one of the features packed into our event, which began with a convivial gathering in the Clock Tower bar in Millom’s Market Square on the Friday evening. This was a chance for everyone to have a natter and catch up. Come the Saturday, the programme began with a creative writing group led by Antoinette
Fawcett and Patrick Wright, based first at Nicholson’s house before moving the short distance to St George’s Church. The main events took place at Millom Network Centre, starting with a compelling talk by Sean O’Brien, who spoke about his admiration for Nicholson’s work – prose as well as poetry – and read some of his own poems which chime with Nicholson’s ideas about people and their geographical locations.

Dr Andrew Frayn of Edinburgh Napier University was the main speaker on the Saturday afternoon, giving a 21st century perspective on Nicholson and offering tantalising thoughts on what might have been written had Nicholson completed a poem he titled ‘Millom in the 21st Century’, intended for the 1981 collection Sea to the West. In fact, only the first three lines were written and the rest is left to our imagination. Andrew followed his talk by leading a discussion of six Nicholson poems, while those who preferred to stretch their legs went on the first of two walks to significant locations led by Blue Badge guide Tom McCafferty. At 5 p.m. the creative writing group reassembled at the church to continue their work, although the group remains in touch, developing ideas further.

Saturday also gave us an inspiring and highly entertaining evening as we enjoyed some of the best contemporary Cumbrian poetry with poets from the anthology This Place I Know (Handstand Press, 2018) at the Beggar’s Theatre in Market Square. Folk/blues duo the Demix provided the music, a perfect choice with lead singer Sarah Littlefeather Demick being one of the poets from This Place I Know.

On Sunday, Harriet and Rob Fraser gave a fascinating presentation about 'Somewhere-Nowhere', a project which combines writing and photography with an urge to explore the landscape in a mindful and reflective way, making 'somewhere' out of 'nowhere'. This was followed by a stimulating workshop for all who wished to join in, while others joined Tom McCafferty on the second of his walks. The festival ended with a summary of the whole weekend by the Society’s vice-president Kathleen Jones.

I’m sure all organisers of similar festivals will know exactly what I mean when I say that my personal enjoyment of the weekend was fuelled by relief! It is always a leap of faith to try something new in such a public forum, but the outcome was very pleasing. All events were well attended with workshops and tours fully booked, everything worked according to plan, and feedback has been uniformly positive. And not least, we successfully raised Nicholson’s profile in his own town, thanks to posters, fliers and publicity all around Millom, ensuring that a new generation knows all about the local man whose poetry established an international reputation.
We received splendid support from the Arts Council who gave us a £1,000 grant to help us on our way. We are also very grateful to Millom Town Council and Millom CGP Trust who both provided financial support. The Society’s committee worked very hard to ensure the festival was a success and I thank them for going above and beyond the call of duty.

Now, inevitably, we are being asked when the next Norman Nicholson Festival will be. Watch this space!

Charlie Lambert, Chair, Norman Nicholson Society

7. Publications

Book Review
A new publication from Sword and Pen titled Literary Trails: Haworth and the Brontës, co-authored by siblings David F. Walford and Catherine Rayner, does a great job of evoking a sense of place in and around Haworth at the time of the Brontës.

The book comprises 20 chapters, featuring 19 walks, including all the places you would expect (and a few more). There are walks in and around the built and natural environment suitable for all from easy to strenuous – as well as those undertaken from the armchair. There is a pleasing structure, with each walk broken down into clear sections including: context, description, fact file, map and photographs; so that even if you can’t personally undertake the walks, you feel as if you have been there.

It is a very practical guide for walkers, but still of general interest to Brontë enthusiasts. The first five chapters provide both some basic guidelines regarding the area and walking, and a brief history of the area and the Brontë family. While this offers nothing really new for those who ‘know their Brontës’, the pictures give a good sense of place and the background is good for those who are coming to the Brontës for the first time. The whole book is well illustrated with black and white pictures and twenty four maps which are both valuable and interesting, making this the kind of book you could read before your walk. Of course colour pictures would have been better, but that would have seriously increased the cost of the publication, and this is not a coffee table book, it’s a practical book which is portable enough to throw in a daysack as you head out to explore Brontë country.

I particularly enjoyed reading about the walks in Haworth itself. It’s many years since I was there and the photographs and description brought it clearly back to my memory while adding some images and information I was not familiar with. The detailed guide through Haworth church and graveyard was particularly informative. The outdoor walks sometimes felt a bit loose in their Brontë connection, and I never figured out exactly where or what ‘The Brontë Way’ was, but beyond the most obvious locations of Penistone Crags and Top Withins, there are walks which evoke the natural landscape as it might have been when the Brontës walked it, and with Ponden Hall, Brontë Bridge, Oxenthorpe, Lumb Foot, Thornton and the local railways all included it really does offer a comprehensive experience.

At £14.99 if you are interested in the Brontës, and fancy taking your own personal literary tour, this is a purchase well worth making. Or if you are far away from Haworth but want to feel as if you are there – this is the best book I’ve read to achieve that goal!

Cally Phillips
Galloway Raiders/J.M.Barrie Society
New Publication

**A Scientific Companion to Robert Frost** represents the first systematic attempt to catalogue and explain all of the references to science and natural history in Frost’s published poetry.

‘Any lover of Frost’s poetry will be delighted by Virginia Smith’s *A Scientific Companion to Robert Frost*. It brings an **exciting new perspective** to many of the poems we have all long admired. Now with her book as our guide […] **we can experience and appreciate these poems more fully.**’


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8. **ALSo**

Don’t forget to download your 2019 journal, *When Writers Attack*, from the Publications tab on the Website (or direct [HERE](#)) and it’s never too soon to think about submitting for 2020. The theme for 2020 is, appropriately enough: **20:20 Vision**. So get your thinking caps on. We are looking for contributions of 1,000 – 1,500 words and remember, it’s a great way to advertise your society.

9. **Comings and goings**

We welcome the Zola Readers and the Terence Rattigan Society.

10. **Last but not least**

This newsletter is also available on the ALS website. Past issues of *ALSo* and the newsletter are available as well on the website under Publications. Please also direct your own society members to our website for direct download of newsletters and journal publications as well as our downloadable guides, and the calendar of events. Encouraging your members to keep in touch helps all our societies.

And finally…Due to data protection we can only store the email contact address you consent to, so it is up to each society to make sure they supply us with an up-to-date contact email address. Some webhosts/email service providers have over-zealous spam settings, which means that emails such as ours which go out to a large number of addresses, are unceremoniously booted into spam. To avoid this, the best thing you can do is add **our email address to your ‘address’ or ‘contacts’ list**. The contact addresses below are for personal, direct correspondence with the appropriate committee member, but for general society business, the email address you need to have is [allianceoflitsocs@gmail.com](mailto:allianceoflitsocs@gmail.com). If you are having difficulty (or are not) receiving e-newsletters from us, this is the email to use to let us know.
ALS Contacts

We welcome your feedback and information. Please contact as follows:

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the individual contributors and not necessarily those of the Alliance. Please send copy for the next issue by 1st February to Cally Phillips at callyphillipsis@gmail.com. We reserve the right to edit copy for space. The autumn newsletter will be published in early March 2020.