



ALS AGM 2020

SECRETARY'S REPORT

Last year's AGM in Nuneaton, hosted superbly by the George Eliot Fellowship, was another feast of memorable lectures and performances, book-buying opportunities, good fellowship and, above all, lively talk about writers and books. As we contemplate the cancellation of this year's AGM in Robin Hood's Bay, which was to be hosted by the Walmsley Society, we regret all those missed experiences. We first talked about the Walmsley Society hosting an AGM with Andrew Davison, the chairman, many years ago, and he and his committee have put so much hard work and imagination into planning a wonderful programme for us. It is truly heart-breaking to see it cancelled and I'd like to thank them for all their hard work. Let's hope we can meet in Robin Hood's Bay in good fellowship sometime in the future.

I would like to focus most of my report on November's meeting of the LitHouses group, because it was so relevant for the ALS membership. LitHouses is an umbrella organisation for professional and volunteer staff at literary museums throughout Britain. The theme of this year's conference, held at John Ruskin's home at Brantwood on Coniston Water, was 'Celebrating our Champions: Members, Friends & Literary Societies'. Cally Phillips, our newsletter editor and prime mover in the J.M. Barrie Society and Galloway Raiders, spoke on literary societies, while Antoinette Fawcett of the Norman Nicholson Society gave a talk, 'In Search of a LitHouse', about her society's work to preserve Norman Nicholson's house in Millom. I also gave a brief talk about the ALS.

Hearing what literary houses staff had to say about literary societies, formally and informally, was both inspiring and worrying. Many feel that literary societies are elitist, out of touch and out of date, while also appreciating the enormous support which some societies provide for related museums. On Saturday we visited the Wordsworth Trust and Dove Cottage, and heard about their 'Re-imagining Wordsworth' project. I was amazed to learn that visitor numbers had been declining rapidly, and part of their ambitious redevelopment project has been concerned with how to engage future generations with the Wordsworths and their legacy. There will be much more emphasis on outreach projects (with the people of Grasmere, with prisons and hospices, and education, both locally and overseas). Additionally, there will be more stress on the Wordsworths' interaction with the local landscape, their bohemian lifestyle, and Dorothy Wordsworth's legacy.

Not every literary society or museum has the resources available to it of the Wordsworth Trust, but I came away thinking that it might be important for all societies to 're-imagine' their writers and to think of new ways in which literary societies might operate in future. The covid crisis has only increased this sense of urgency, as the traditional model of a literary society with meetings for lectures or visits to places of interest will remain impossible for some time. We are hoping to dedicate a future newsletter to the future of literary societies and hope that many of you will contribute your thoughts.

The line-up of future AGMs is exciting and impressive: next year, Betjeman and Hopkins in Highgate; 2022 Philip Larkin in Hull; 2023 Charlotte M. Yonge in Winchester; 2024 Arthur Ransome; and 2025 Kipling.

I'd just like to conclude by saying that, although we cannot meet together physically this year, I really feel that I have been sustained through these months of lockdown through friendships formed through my involvement with the Johnson Society in Lichfield, the ALS committee and friends in other societies made through past AGMs. Not to mention by books! Let us hope that we can meet again next year in Highgate.

Marty Ross

Secretary