

Honorary members of 1987 – 1989

1987 Jack Webster, Ted Hughes

1988 Naomi Mitchison

1989 Hamish MacInnes, James Loughran, Sam K Gaw, Sir Sean Connery

1987 Jack Webster (1930-2020)

Jack Webster's autobiography - *A Grain of Truth* - indicates why Irvine Burns Club offered him the honour. He is a journalist, born in 1931 in the Aberdeenshire village of Maud. He was an ill youth, having at 16 been diagnosed with a leaking heart valve and burdened with a stammer, and was told in early childhood he would have to take a desk job, and give up any thought of fulfilling his journalistic career. He gradually overcame his health problems and was able to progress from the local Turriff Advertiser through various newspapers to finally the Herald in Glasgow.

He wrote initially of his love and experiences in the north east of Scotland, but as he travelled abroad and began to mix with the rich and famous, he expanded his writings, while always observing matters from a Scottish perspective. Irvine Burns Club were delighted when he appeared in person to receive his Honorary Membership, and even more so when he spoke the following year at the 'Heckling Shed'. This was an annual event when the Directors of the club and their guests invite a distinguished personality to speak on a subject of his choice usually pertaining to Scotland, in the restored Shed where Burns worked for a time when living in Irvine.

(contributed by I H Y Wood)

'The Times' obituary of Jack Webster (19.3.2020) records that he sought inspiration for his fluid writing style from Lewis Grassie Gibbon (James Leslie Mitchell), whose writings he encountered in the 1950s at the 'Press & Journal' in Aberdeen, where Mitchell had worked. Jack Webster said 'Sunset Song' "taught me more about the art of writing than any other influence". The obituary mentions his 18 books, and his meetings with Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, George Best, Pele, Elizabeth Taylor, Christine Keeler, Ginger Rogers, Irving Berlin and Richard Rogers, Charlie Chaplin, and Muhammed Ali.

Letter of acceptance, written from Netherhill Avenue, Glasgow, on 6 Jan, 1987, to Dr Ian Wood, President of the Club

Dear Dr Wood,

Your invitation to become an Honorary Member of Irvine Burns Club was as unexpected as it seemed to be unwarranted.

However, I am prepared to let others be the judge of that - and indeed it would be an impertinence to say 'No' and a discourtesy not to say how appreciative I am of your kind thought.

That, as you will have gathered, is a very firm acceptance and I am also delighted to take up your invitation to your Supper of 23rd January, all the more willingly since I am excused all but the briefest of address.

I look forward to renewing our acquaintance that evening.
Again with many thanks,
Yours sincerely,
Jack Webster

1987 Ted Hughes (1930-1998)

In keeping with tradition Irvine Burns Club was delighted to offer honorary membership to the Poet Laureate, as all since Alfred Lord Tennyson in 1850 were so asked. Undoubtedly Ted Hughes had earned the right to join the illustrious group. A Yorkshire man, born in 1930, he was, like Burns, of farming stock; his poetry was vastly different however, being characterised by dark, sometimes violent, imagery drawn from the British countryside. This can be readily found in 'Hawk Roosting'. Nevertheless he made his mark as one of the greatest English poets of the century.

He became Poet Laureate in 1984. He was often in the headlines in the 1960s after the suicide of his first wife Sylvia Plath. The American poet's devotees blamed Hughes for her death, particularly as he remained silent after allegations about their short and ill fated marriage were made. More tragedy was to follow him. He separated from his new partner, Assia Gutschmann, and she was found with their two-year old daughter dead, in her London flat. Some of his most bleak and famous poems followed, the next year, and these were dedicated to them both. He eventually released *The Birthday Letters*, a collection of poems addressed to Sylvia over the years, indicating that he had never stopped thinking of her. He was eventually awarded the £10,000 Forward Poetry Prize for the letters but was already too ill to attend and accept. The Queen was present at his last public appearance, when she awarded him the Order of Merit the month before he died in October 1998.

(contributed by I H Y Wood)

Letter of acceptance, written from North Taunton, Devon, on 6 Jan., 1987, to Dr Ian Wood, President of the Club

Dear Mr Wood

Thank you for your invitation, which honours me greatly. I would be delighted to become an Honorary Member of Irvine Burns Club.

With my Best Wishes,
Sincerely,
Ted Hughes

1988 Naomi Mitchison (1897-1999, aged 101)

Naomi Mitchison's acceptance letter (below) is one of the more interesting, so simply yet so eloquently reflecting both her own character and the human causes which, through Robert Burns, bind together people of different countries.

First and foremost, Naomi Mitchison was an author with an output formidable both in quantity and in range - 70 books in as many years – short stories, children's fiction, science fiction, fiction dealing with race and with nuclear war, poetry, biography, travel, and three volumes of autobiography. By the time of her first novel, 'The Conquered' (1923), she was also politically involved - she helped to establish early birth control clinics in London and she gave a paper at the World League for Sex Reform Congress in 1929. The epic historical novel 'The Corn King and the Spring Queen' (1931) signalled her agonised concern at what happens when a culture collapses. A 1935 novel, 'We Have Been Warned', glimpsed the shadow of Hitler and discussed international socialism.

As a child she was taken to a meeting in support of the Dublin dock strike – as she decided to put her pocket money into the collection, a lifelong sense of injustice about social inequality was born, a sympathy for the political underdog. Her family, the Haldanes, were for generations influential in Scottish affairs. Her father was J S Haldane, the Edinburgh physiologist instrumental in improving safety in the mines, her mother was Kathleen Trotter, the suffragist, her brother was J B S Haldane, writer and scientist, and her uncle was the Lord Haldane (R B S Haldane) of our honorary membership list (1912), the Secretary of State for war from 1905. In 1916 she married Richard, later (1964) Lord, Mitchison, and three of their children became university professors with chairs in the sciences.

During World War II, she ran the estate at Carradale, Argyll, her home since 1937, and the local Labour party and took in evacuees. After the war she became involved in Scottish Nationalism, serving on Argyll and Highland bodies for thirty years. She took an active interest in the problems of deprived children and West Coast fishing. Neal Ascherson wrote: "She was wise, having lived through much personal turmoil, and brave: somebody who lived out her feminism in days when love and freedom could carry grim penalties. But above all I will miss her fearless confidence. If intelligent people shouted long and loud enough at governments, she believed, truth would prevail. She often did prevail."

On the occasion of the 100th birthday of Lady Mitchison (a title she rarely used), in Carradale, her fellow-journalist Neal Ascherson recalled her method of getting an article published – "she would appear in an editor's office and hold his nose to the typescript . . . I was often deputed to receive her, if not actually fend her off . . . she was so friendly and fascinating that I always promised that her piece would go in".

The Bakgatla people of Botswana made her tribal mother from 1963 to 1973. The rich history of that people attracted the interest not only of Mitchison but of Alexander McCall-Smith. These and other writers have captured and preserved their history.

In 1989, she said: "So long as I can hold a pencil, let me go on." In her 90s, she was still active, digging potatoes, milking cows, and bringing in the harvest. Her 'Herald' obituary noted that "she was a woman of great capability, determination, fortitude and, above all, enthusiasm.").

Letter of acceptance, written from 115 Blenheim Crescent, London, W11 on Jan. 15th, 1988

Dear Matthew Brown

Of course I am delighted to think I shall belong to this Club & this bit of Scottish history. Thankyou! I think the image we have of Burns is a great help to all of us who try to break down the rule of money power, especially in Scotland. And again I think it was in his tradition that I have found it so easy to make heart-to-heart friends in Africa – especially my dear small country, Botswana – India, Bangla Desh, & for that matter Europe. I remember, in the Sixties, two Russian writers coming over, very nervous and uncertain as to what would happen. I drove them over to Carradale & got together some friends from the village, mostly fisher & forestry folk, one recited Tam o' Shanter, others sang. It was a mad success! All the Russians know Burns. Marshak did a very good translation.

I hope on Burns night you will remember how little "man to man" means in South Africa now. And it is not the only place. There is a terrible, increasing gap between Employed & Un-employed in our own country. I hope Burns readers will remember this.

My youngest son Avrion, who is Prof. of Zoology at London University & his Skye wife Lorna, always has a Burns party. I am getting too old to dance & I don't like whisky (or neeps) but it will have the right feeling.

Thank you again.

Naomi Mitchison

If I can find it when I am back at Carradale I will send you Marshak's translation.

General Secretary Gorbachev declined to accept honorary membership in 1988: Matt Brown, President of the Club in 1988, offered honorary membership to Mikhail Gorbachev, President of the Soviet Union. The Ambassador of the USSR, explaining that it was not possible for him to accept, referred to the popularity of Burns' poetry in Russia:

"General Secretary Gorbachev has instructed me to convey to you and your club his heartfelt gratitude for the wonderful gift - the complete works of Robert Burns. You are, of course, aware that the works of this great Scottish poet are very popular in our country. They are being read in both English, Russian and other languages of the peoples of the Soviet Union. We are fortunate to have an excellent translation of his poems by the Soviet poet S. Marshak. We highly value not only the beauty and lyricism of his poetry but also its internationalist nature.

Mr. Gorbachev has also asked me to thank you and your club for your high appreciation of the Soviet initiatives towards International Peace and Disarmament and of his personal efforts towards this goal.

Mr. Gorbachev was moved by your nomination of him as Honorary member of Irvine Burns Club but because of his official position it will be difficult for him to accept it. Mr. Gorbachev has asked to convey his best wishes to you and to the members of the Club."

1989 Hamish MacInnes (1930-2020)

Hamish MacInnes, one of the founders of the Glencoe Mountain Rescue team, has done more for Scottish mountaineering and, in particular, for mountain rescue, than any other Scot of his generation. Hugely respected across the world by mountaineers and climbers, the irony is that the man, who is now totally synonymous with Scotland's mountains, was born in the quiet coastal town of Gatehouse-of-Fleet on the Solway. The day that sparked his career was, while living in Greenock, at the age of 14, when a tax inspector took him on his motorbike to the Cobbler, for his first ever day's climbing. His National Service in 1948-50 was spent mainly climbing in Austria with British troops on breaks.

In 1961, MacInnes, by then a resident climber and climbing instructor in Glencoe, recognised that organised action was required to assist climbers attracted by the mountaineering challenges of the area, such as the legendary Aonach Eagach ridge and Buchaille Etive Mor. The outcome was the foundation of the Glencoe Mountain Rescue Committee (later reformed to become the "team"), a registered charitable institution, operated entirely by volunteers and which has saved the lives of hundreds of climbers and hill walkers.

He is a leading authority and innovator on mountain rescue and has invented some vital mountaineering and rescue equipment, including the 'Terrorclax' ice axe and the MacInnes stretcher. He also founded the Search and Rescue Dog Association and is a member of the Mountain Rescue Committee of Scotland.

Within Scotland, Hamish MacInnes was one of a small team to undertake the first winter traverse of the Cuillin Ridge in Skye (1965) and, internationally, he has tackled all of the major climbs in the Alps, Caucasus, New Zealand, South America and the Himalayas, including three expeditions to Mount Everest in the 1970s.

His honours include the BEM, an OBE, an Honorary Doctor of Laws from the University of Glasgow and an Honorary Doctor of Science from the University of Aberdeen. In 2003 he was inducted into the Scottish Sporting Hall of Fame, and in 2008 awarded the inaugural Scottish Award for Excellence in Mountain Culture.

Hamish MacInnes wrote more than twenty books about mountains, climbing and adventure round the world, is a regular broadcaster and has been the technical climbing and mountaineering safety consultant on major films such as The Eiger Sanction, Five Days One Summer, The Mission and various James Bond movies. In 2007, he took from a drawer a murder mystery he had written in the early 70s, and had it published as Murder in the Glen in 2008.

In 1989, he accepted an invitation from Bill Nolan, then President of the Irvine Burns Club, to become an Honorary Member.

Letter of acceptance, written from Glencoe on 3 November 1988, on the official headed paper of the Glencoe Mountain Rescue Association, of which he was Hon. Secretary

Dear Sir

I consider it a great honour to be invited to become an Honorary Member of your distinguished club.

Also, as a lifelong fan of Robert Burns I find it gratifying to be associated with his memory.

Yours sincerely,
Hamish MacInnes

1989 James Loughran (1931-)

Born in Glasgow, James Loughran graduated from the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and first came to public notice when he won the Philharmonia Orchestra's Conducting Competition in 1961.

Subsequently, he became Principal Conductor of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra as well as making his debut conducting operas at Covent Garden, Netherlands and Scottish Opera. In 1971, he was successor to Sir John Barbirolli as Conductor of the Halle Orchestra where he introduced new music to what had become a "somewhat tired scenario" and later became Principal Conductor of the Bamberg Symphony Orchestra.

Loughran made outstanding recordings of the Beethoven and Brahms Symphonies during those years and his recording of Holst's "The Planets" won him a Golden Disk. In September 1993, the Japan Philharmonic appointed him the Principal Guest Conductor and in 1996, he was appointed Principal Conductor of Aarhus Symphony Orchestra in Denmark.

In 1989, he accepted an invitation from Bill Nolan, then President of the Irvine Burns Club, to become an Honorary Member.

In the 2010 New Year Honours, James Loughran was appointed a CBE for his services, as a conductor, to classical music.

Letter of acceptance, written from Macclesfield on 8 December 1988, to Club President W A Nolan

Dear Mr Nolan,

Your letter was waiting for me on my return from being around the world since the middle of October with conducting engagements.

I am deeply honoured to be invited to become an Honorary Member of Irvine Burns Club and delighted to accept. Thank you Mr President for your appreciation by including me in your term of office.

Yours sincerely,
James Loughran

1989 Sam K Gaw (1932-2018)

Samuel Knox Gaw, an Irvine man, born and bred, was the youngest ever President of The Irvine Burns Club when, in 1967, he followed the late Martin Cameron into the chair of the world's longest continuous Burns Club. He has served the Irvine Burns Club for the past four decades in various roles - as a Director, Honorary Secretary, Librarian, Visitor Guide, Curator, Historian and Reader.

A former Town Councillor in what was then the Royal Burgh of Irvine, Sam Gaw rose rapidly through the ranks to become Burgh Treasurer and would surely have held the ancient title of "Provost of the Royal Burgh" if local government re-organisation under The Wheatley Commission had not rendered the Royal Burgh obsolete.

Never one to limit his horizons locally, Sam Gaw represented The Irvine Burns Club on the Ayrshire Federation of Burns Clubs and on the Robert Burns International Federation, becoming that prestigious organisation's World President in 1979.

A noted Burns scholar, reader and orator, he has travelled the world to address Burns Gatherings, most notably in Canada and the United States. He has had several articles on Burns published, including essays, such as Poet on a Tightrope and The Myth and the Gentle Science, both of which are contained within the Burns Federation's website www.worldburnsclub.com.

Keen to engage in debate on anything Scottish, the outspoken and sometimes controversial Sam Gaw could almost have been in Robert Burns' imagination when he wrote:

"Here's freedom to them that wad read,
Here's freedom to them that wad write.
There's none ever fear'd that the truth should be heard.
But they whom the truth wad indite".

In 1989, he accepted an invitation from Bill Nolan, then President of the Irvine Burns Club, to become an Honorary Member of the Burns Club that he had served so well over the years.

Letter of acceptance, written from 'Camasunary' in Irvine on 12 January 1989:

The President & Directors of IRVINE BURNS CLUB.

Dear President Nolan

I take great pleasure & readily accept the kindly honour of HONORARY MEMBERSHIP, a sinecure usually reserved for those much OLDER than I. {COMPARATIVELY}.

BURNS, writing a letter of introduction for a young friend remarked, "The goods of this World cannot be divided without being lessened:- but why be a niggard of that which bestows bliss on a fellow-creature, yet takes nothing from our own means of enjoyment."

It will soon be a quarter of a Century since I first joined the Directorate of this, the oldest Burns Club in the World with a continuous record.

In the Years since 1827 the Club has honoured men; and women, in the classless society of those who love and revere the Aspirations & the Works of the Poet of Mankind. IT HAS ALSO HONOURED PRIME-MINISTERS AND SIC-LIKE CRAITTURS.

I would not count myself worthy of being included among the shining Bards, the Lairds of Academe (but I am certain that I could play Tig with the "Knights & Squires who represent our Brughs & Shires" who over the last 160 years have been so honoured) did I not take comfort from the Poet's Epistle to James Smith in which I see a little of myself.

*"The Star that rules my luckless lot
Has fated me the russet coat
And damned my Fortune, to the Groat;
But, in requit,
Has blest me with a random-shot
O' countra wit."*

We, members & Directors, rather take a myopic view of the value of Club(s) & the Burns Movement.

My first reaction to the Scot abroad was distaste at their outwardly expressed hunger and enthusiasm for Burns & the tradition maintained by Clubs like ours, until with "distant" vision I realised that we fulfill their desire to belong. Scotland, the country they never got to grips with when here, became real & Burns, the Burns folk encapsulate all for them, Country, Family and Auld Lang Syne.

A rather serious viewpoint belying the fact that such as IRVINE BURNS CLUB is a place where one can see

*" . . Social Life & Glee sit doon
All joyous and unthinking
Till, quite transmogrified, they're grown
Debauchery & Drinking."*

In 1869 the Club marked the Centenary of Galt's birth by a Dinner, with a programme of 69 Toasts & Responses. I regret my absence from your board but I will be celebrating the Birthday in Niagara with inhabitants of that part of Canada founded by John Galt. Could we, FOR AULD IRVINE'S SAKE, HAVE 89 TOASTS AND RESPONSES at our respective dinners?

Please convey my BEST WISHES and GRATEFUL THANKS.

Yours aye!

Samuel K Gaw

Notes:

The letter is written on the official headed paper of The Burns Federation Monuments Committee, of which Sam Gaw was Convener for many years.

'Brughs' is an old spelling of 'Burghs'

The second quotation is from the "Address to the Unco Guid".

1989 Sir Sean Connery (1930-2020)

Born in an Edinburgh tenement where 12 families shared a toilet, Sir Sean Connery is probably the best-known Scot on the planet. His mother, Effie, was a cleaner, his father, Joseph, drove a lorry and worked in a factory, and Sean left school at 14 and worked as a milkman for St Cuthbert's Dairy before joining the Royal Navy at 18, returning to Edinburgh to work as a bricklayer, lifeguard and coffin polisher, moonlighting as an artist's model at Edinburgh College of Art.

In the public's mind, he will be forever linked with Ian Fleming's fictional character – James Bond, special agent 007 – albeit that, on first seeing him on screen, Fleming was heard to comment that "Connery is not exactly as I envisaged Bond".

Fleming's views didn't really matter, for the public saw Connery as the embodiment of James Bond and Dr No, filmed in 1962, was the start of a whirlwind success that led to a litany of Bond Movies over the next few years, including several comebacks by Connery in the role on which he tried to turn his back on more than one occasion. Public demand is a strange phenomenon.

Connery has played many varied roles in films over the years, working with directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, John Huston and Brian De Palma. After a Best actor award in 1986 from The British Film Academy for his role in The Name of The Rose, he won an Academy Award

("Oscar") in 1987 for Best Supporting Actor playing the Irish cop Malone in The Untouchables.

In 1990, Sean Connery received the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) Lifetime Achievement Award and, in 1996, he received the Cecil B. DeMille Golden Globe Award for "outstanding contribution to the entertainment field", given by the Hollywood Foreign Press Association. In 1997, he was honoured with a Gala Tribute by the Film Society of Lincoln Center in New York and in 1998, received the British Academy Fellowship from BAFTA. He continues to work steadily, despite suffering from various throat ailments, spending his time between the film studio and the golf course where he is a "better than average" golfer.

A Freeman of his native City of Edinburgh, he was knighted in 2000, despite having allegedly been refused the honour two years previously for political reasons, viz. his lifelong association with the Scottish National Party. He has also received awards in France, including the Legion d'Honneur, and the Commandeur des Arts and des Lettres.

In 1989, he accepted an invitation from Bill Nolan, then President of the Irvine Burns Club, to become an Honorary Member. His hand-written acceptance from his home in Nueva Andalucia demonstrates the typical Connery flamboyancy, his short reply fully filling the single sheet!

Letter of acceptance, written from Casa Malibu, Nueva Andalucia, Malaga, on Friday 13th Jan., 1989:

My Dear Mr Nolan

Thank you I am delighted to accept your splendid invitation.

Please forgive delay and the brevity of this letter, but I've just returned, after 5 months, working two films back to back.

All the best.

Sean Connery

(PS rather ominous date)

Notes:

Sean Connery bought Casa Malibu in Puerto Banus in the early 1970s and put it on the market in 1998 for \$9m after tiring of the overdevelopment in the area. The land was later reclassified for flats, and a 4-storey block of 70 expensive apartments now occupies the site.

The two films Connery worked on in those months of 1988 were "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" (rel. 1989) and "Family Business" (rel. 1990), the latter being a crime drama made with Dustin Hoffman and Matthew Broderick.