

Drink and draw makes its mark on arts scene

IT'S been a year since artist and Inverness Drink and Draw founder Claire Maclean first looked at the cultural make up of the city – and saw a blank canvas.

"The visual arts scene in Inverness is getting pretty exciting now, but I feel like that's a recent development," she said.

"I started Drink and Draw mostly because I didn't see any kind of network outside of the realm of the fine arts and crafts.

"The main complaint of people in Inverness is that there's 'nothing happening,' and they often move to those other cities to where stuff is happening.

"I'm a firm believer in making where you live better, not just leaving to where it's already better."

The drive to improve the city's visual arts scene led to the creation of the Inverness Drink and Draw events – celebrating a year since its first event at the Tooth and Claw. It's a milestone that has impressed – and surprised – its founder.

She said: "I never expected it to be so consistently successful for a whole year!"

"It's just been growing and growing. The success is absolutely down to the people who keep coming back."

And with the anniversary coming up on Wednesday, March 22, alongside the regular doodling and games will be a special gallery event showcasing the full year of Drink and Draw artworks.

"I've saved all of the drawings everyone's done over the last year – everything from scribbles to full pieces!"

"A lot of people say they've always been meaning to come along to Drink and Draw, but haven't for various reasons. This will be the best time to come and make first contact and check out what we're about without the pressure of sitting round a table and drawing.

"The night will act as a 'hello' to new people and a 'thank you' to everyone who's made it what it is today."

This gallery will be the third special event of its type – previous events have seen Claire and the group's attendees construct a gingerbread village out of cardboard for

Christmas, and a cardboard monster for Halloween. "On Halloween, there were two guys drinking at the bar, bewildered, just laughing and taking in the madness going on around them!" Claire laughed.

"After a few pints, they got stuck right in and became an integral part of our night. It was like a surreal team-building exercise on psychedelics.

“I’m a firm believer in making where you live better, not just leaving to where it’s already better

Claire Maclean



A typical evening at Drink and Draw, which celebrates its first anniversary next week with an open invite to newcomers to get along and check it out.

History repeats!

WRITER Kellan MacInnes returns to the Highlands to talk about his novel set during the original Scottish referendum fever – with a second referendum the country's hottest topic again.

He will be talking to the Highland Literary Salon on Tuesday, March 21 about his debut novel published last September by Dingwall's Sandstone Press, *The Making of Mickey Bell*. Much of it is set in the Highlands as HIV-positive Mickey – "a benefits scrounger from Glasgow" with a serious Munro-bagging habit – literally heads for the hills when trouble hits.

The return of the referendum to the political agenda, is ironic: "I started the book when holiday plans fell through and I'd had two weeks of unexpected time stuck in my caravan with the dog. I'd had some ideas for a novel and by the end of the two weeks, I had 60,000 words and the bones of Mickey Bell. That was back in 2013, so I was actually writing about a referendum that hadn't happened yet."

He added: "Now it could almost be read as a book about a second referendum! Mickey Bell is a sort of Scottish everyman – and his journey to becoming more independent mirrors Scotland's journey. But it can also just be read as a boy meets girl romance as well. Or just a kind of adventure story."

In the book, Mickey is a gay man living, like Kellan, with HIV – so did it take courage to reveal that?

"I've always been open



Kellan MacInnes is set for the Highland Literary Salon.

about my HIV status. My family and friends all know and to an extent I sort of addressed that in my first non-fiction book Caleb's List," said Kellan.

That book was subtitled "Climbing The Scottish Mountains Visible from Arthur's Seat" and went on to be nominated for 2013's Saltire Society First Scottish Book Award.

Kellan said: "What is important is that by writing more about HIV it maybe breaks down some of the stigma attached to the condition. And as a writer it is probably easier for me to be open about it than it would be for a bus driver, say."

"I worked for one of Scotland's leading HIV charities. Quite a lot of that experience there was working for clients of the charities and that fed into the book as well."

Kellan is the guest at the latest Highland Literary Salon event on Tuesday, March 21 at the Glen Mhor Hotel, Inverness from 6.30pm.

It starts with a writers' workshop and then at 7.30pm there will be an author's talk.

For more details, see www.highlandlitsalon.com

■ Kellan's novel, *The Making Of Mickey Bell* (Sandstone £8.99), is available now.



Actors Lauren Hurwood (left) and Luca Rutherford during a scene from the play.

Letter play gets write stuff from the public

A SIT-down session that took place last week will provide inspiration for a new interactive play that explores people's most important relationship – with themselves.

Letters to Myself – coming to Eden Court on Wednesday, March 22 – uses real letters and contributions from the public to tell a story of people trying to find themselves.

And at the Mobile Living Room session last Wednesday to prepare for the show, playwright and producer Becci Sharrock sat down with Invernessians to help them tell

their stories. "It was an absolute joy," she explained. "It's a bit scary when you put yourself out there in a venue, hoping that people will engage in what you're doing, but everyone was great and really happy to stop and talk and I met a really wide range of people."

"I don't think people know straight away what they're going to write about but we often talk about general advice or the idea of letter writing. I met a lovely woman who told me she'd recently been back in touch with people she'd met when

evacuated aged four or five, and now, decades later, they were writing letters to each other."

The play is still looking for contributions, and anybody can take part by going to www.letterstomyself.org.uk. "The most important thing is to be completely honest with yourself," she said. "It's about making time to have a conversation with yourself and enjoying that."

■ **Letters to Myself is at Eden Court's OneTouch Theatre on Wednesday, March 22, from 8pm. More info at www.eden-court.co.uk**

Tracking story of Highland survivor

SHORTLISTED for a Railway & Canal Historical Society Award recognising the best in transport books, David Spaven's history of the beautiful, but economically vulnerable rail link between Inverness and the north of Scotland is a product of a lifelong fascination and it shows.

The son of the late Frank Spaven of the Highlands and Islands Development Board, who was instrumental in saving the line, David has spent his working life involved in rail, a career that started with a holiday job at the Invergordon area manager's office.

This is his most personal book yet, one where his father plays an important part and which draws on his own memories, his close connections to those who worked on the line or fought to keep it open, and his own collection of photographs taken along the route.

His history of the line reveals why the rail link between Inverness and Thurso does not follow a straight line – the Duke of Sutherland had other priorities than seeing a rail link over the Dornoch Firth, and as he was a major investor, the line followed his desired path.

The 168-mile long line has not always been assured of its future and Spaven carefully chronicles the efforts of the "MacPuff" campaign in which his father was closely involved, to protect the line from the Beeching Cuts which closed so many British lines. In doing so, he makes this

much more than a book for rail enthusiasts. Talk of engine types is of much less concern than the sociological implications for an economically vulnerable community.

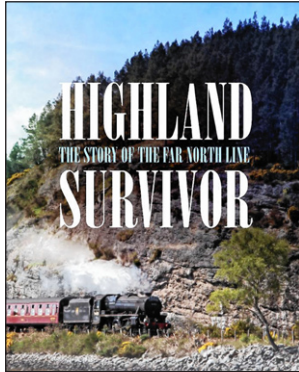
This being the Highlands, the line is not just vulnerable to political decisions taken in far off places, but also the extremes of Highland climate and he shows this by telling how the Highland Line made international headlines when stranded by snow and the challenges it faced when the Ness viaduct was swept away in February 1989.

The line survived all that and more recently has seen once disused stations come back into service as part of a move to get commuters and tourists off the road and back on the rails, but Spaven sees much more to be done and has a few suggestions himself to safeguard the future of a line that remains close to his heart.

"For 142 years, the Far North Line has been a great survivor," he concludes.

"I hope that in the decades ahead it will take its rightful place as a leader in rural railway innovation, and that, once again, it will become central to the economic and social life of the 168-mile corridor it has served since 1874."

■ **Highland Survivor: The Story of the Far North Line was written by David Spaven and is published by Kessock Books at £16.99**



David Spaven's latest book is his most personal yet.

Best friends make their mark as 'hottest newcomers' at festival

A ROSS-SHIRE singer whose work is inspired by her upbringing in the Highlands was thrilled to be named amongst the hottest newcomers at Glasgow's Celtic Connections festival and is now looking forward to what promises to be a busy year ahead.

Highland folk duo Carma is made up of 20-year-olds Carmen Beaton from Dingwall and Kenna Ross from Nairn.

The duo beat off competition from hundreds of competitors to be named among the top 30 best new acts at the festival's showcase for the country's best new folk acts. That previously launched the careers of household names such as Karine Polwart.

Carmen, who went to Maryburgh Primary and Dingwall Academy first recognised her love for performing music when she was part of the Gaelic choir at school.

Going on to fiddle and songwriting classes with Féis Rois motivated her to continue her studies. She explained: "We met while studying popular music at North Highland College a couple of years back, and then moved to Aberdeen to continue our studies where we started writing and playing together seriously. Since then we have both moved back home to the Highlands which we feel reflects our songs and music the best. We are best friends on and off stage and it shows when we perform. I think one of the best qualities in a band is

to work with people you get along with and we are very lucky. I can't wait to see what the future holds as Carma."

The girls launched their first EP, *Serendipity*, as part of an ongoing Scottish tour which includes a performance on STV's *Live at Five* show.

Carma formed in 2015 as an offshoot of the girls' former band, *AlmostFolk*, and have since played at an array of major Scottish festivals including Belladrum, Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Celtic Connections, Jocktoberfest, and North Hop. They write and play original material and their style has been described as easy listening, alternative folk, incorporating ukelele and piano with melodious vocal harmonies.

Despite their success, both girls are proud of their Highland roots and intend to stay in the area for the time being. Kenna studies music in Perth while Carmen, based in Dingwall, is studying sound production in North Highland College.

The duo have played in a number of local venues, including Glacbeg Croft, and recently did a live session at North Highland Radio studios based on the High Street in Dingwall. Carmen says she is always keen to play home gigs with a chance to chat to family faces.

■ **For gigs, visit @carmaduo on Facebook. Watch Carma on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCbnYdviYZDcFA0VntSDHAHg>**



Kenna Ross (left) and Carmen Beaton made their mark at the influential Celtic Connections festival. Picture: Shae Myles