

# Letter from Scotland

The year 2018 was one of the most depressing years of the century so far. Scotland fared better than most but we were still beset by austerity, a cramped economy, deteriorating public services, environmental damage and political stalemate.

The year began with temperatures down to minus 5 degrees Celsius – even here in Edinburgh – and an outbreak of winter flu which left 8 people dead, including an apparently healthy 18 year old girl. In February and March we suffered from the chilly “Beast from the East.” In June we had thunderstorms and then one of the hottest summers on record. Then we were into the storms of the autumn, beginning with Storm Ali, bringing down trees and causing travel chaos. Who could doubt that climate change is already under way, even here on the outer edge of Europe ?

When it came to events, the most poignant for me was the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the First World War. The commemorations up and down the country in November were so moving and so many –

wreath-laying ceremonies, church services, concerts, television programmes.



Image of Dr Elsie Inglis traced into the sand at St Andrews on 11 November 2018 Photo ©2018TheEdinburghReporter

It all brought home to us all

how fragile civilisation can be, how cruel history was and how dangerous a world we still live in. There are some 20 conflicts

going on as I write, five of them major wars. The world still as too

many tyrants, all of them unpleasant men – Putin, Xi, Assad, Bin

Salman, Kim Jong-un. There are more who are not quite tyrants but

are never-the-less unpleasant men – Trump, Orban, Erdogan,

Khamenei. Any of these nutcases could plunge us into another major

war. Who can doubt that we need a stronger United Nations to keep

them in check ?

And then there is Brexit, another nutty case. Scotland's role in this affair has been slightly more sensible than the other

nations of the so-called United Kingdom. We voted by 62 per cent to remain in the European Union and the Scottish Parliament has been pretty consistent in calling for Brexit to be abandoned – except, of course, for the Conservatives who've argued that Scotland should accept the will of the UK as a whole. Even the fishing and farming communities in the North East, who voted Leave, had second thoughts when they realised that their markets in Europe were being threatened and the supply of hard-working labourers from Eastern Europe might be cut off.

The First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has suggested a compromise – that Britain leave the EU but remain in the Customs Union and the Single Market. But none of the other parties at Westminster seem keen on that idea. Now the SNP and indeed the Scottish Parliament, including Labour MSPs, have been advocating a second referendum to break the deadlock. And, always in the background is the possibility of a second referendum on Scottish independence, if Scotland is “dragged out of the EU against our wishes.”



Meanwhile, the Scottish economy has bumped along at a modest

growth rate of around 1.5 per cent. Unemployment is down to 3.7 per cent but consumer spending is weak and shops, supermarkets, restaurants and pubs are all having a difficult time. The public services are struggling too. The budgets for the NHS, schools and local councils have only just kept up with inflation, despite increases in local taxes and higher income-tax on the rich.

We got a shock reminder of the fragile state of the economy when Michelin announced in November that it intends to close its tyre factory in Dundee with the loss of 850 jobs. Efforts are going on to “re-purpose” the factory before it finally closes in 2020 but no one quite knows how that will work. It was a particular shock to Dundee, a city trying to restore its fortunes with a massive redevelopment of the waterfront, including the new V&A museum which opened its strange concrete hull to the public in September.

As one iconic building opened, another burnt down. Charles Rennie Mackintosh’s Glasgow School of Art (finished in 1909) went up in flames in June, while it was being restored after another devastating fire in 2014. We know the cause of the first fire – a canister of foam left next to a warm film projector. But we still don’t know the cause of the second fire or how much it will cost to rebuild Mackintosh’s stark and dark masterpiece, if indeed it can be rebuilt.

Our spirits were restored by

our sports men and women. We sent 226 athletes to the Commonwealth

Games in Australia and came 8<sup>th</sup>

in the medals table, winning 44 medals. Our national rugby team beat

England 25-13 at Murrayfield. Celtic won all three major trophies on

the football field. But Scotland's women's football team did even better, qualifying for the 2019 World Cup to be held in France

in the summer. And it was lovely seeing Kirsty Ewen win the unsung

hero award at the BBC 's Sports Personality of the Year ceremony.

Kirsty overcame her mental health problems by becoming a swimming

coach in Inverness.

So there were some bright

spots during 2018 but, as I say, not many. And as for 2019, the

prospects look gloomy. The dark cloud of Brexit hangs over everything...our politics, our economy and our spirits. It's not just the uncertainty of it, or the divisiveness but the sheer madness

of a self-inflicted wound. I fear too it may cause the rest of Europe

to falter in its pursuit of peace and prosperity.

Each country may face a little more inwards, leaving international problems unsolved, like the wars of the Middle East, the migrant crisis, climate change, the rise of extremism, the power of the multinational corporations, the plastic pollution of the planet.

In Scotland, we face a year of

stalemate. There will, no doubt, be a Brexit reaction leading

to greater support for independence. Already the opinion polls are showing the country evenly divided and the SNP's independence march in October saw tens of thousands (some say 70,000) turn out on the streets of Edinburgh. But Nicola Sturgeon will be waiting for a much surer majority before calling a second referendum and that's unlikely to come in the next year. Scottish Labour still hasn't found its feet after stumbling along for a decade. And the Scottish Conservatives have only one slogan: we don't like the SNP.



Independence Rally October 2018

Even the United Nations is struggling to find something uplifting to say about 2019. So far it's come up with "The Year of the Periodic Table", the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its discovery – in a dream – by the Russian scientist Dmitry Mendeleev. The year is to be marked with a series of conferences for chemical scientists, including a "global breakfast for women in chemistry" on 12<sup>th</sup> February.

Let's hope they can mix up something colourful and not too explosive for 2019.