



## The Neil Gunn Writing Competition 2018/19

Hi!

You are going to be doing some writing for the Neil Gunn writing competition.

I thought that you might like to know who he was and a bit about him.

His full name was **Neil Miller Gunn** and he lived from 1891 to 1973.

He was born at Dunbeath, a small fishing community in Caithness.

His father was the captain of a herring fishing boat, so was away from home a lot. This may explain why women characters and especially mother figures are always important in Neil's stories.

Neil was part of a large family. He was the 7<sup>th</sup> of 9 children.

Neil didn't really like school all that much. He hated being cooped up in the classroom and sometimes tried to sneak out when the teacher was busy. But his 'tackety boots' made so much noise on the floor that he often was caught sneaking out and got into trouble.

When Neil was at school, the school leaving age was 13! In his last term everyone had to write an essay. Neil chose the subject 'A Sea Storm' and got the highest mark ever given by his teacher.

His mother didn't want her sons to go into the fishing industry like their father. It was dangerous and starting to decline and as there was growing unemployment, many people were leaving the Highlands to look for work. After finishing school Neil was sent to SW Scotland to live with his older sister and her husband. He had a tutor and passed the entrance exams for the Civil Service in 1907.

He then moved to London

In 1910 he was posted back to Scotland as a Customs & Excise Officer.

During the First World War he had a variety of roles, one of which was to route ships around minefields.

After the war he became Excise Officer in residence at Glen Mhor Distillery, just outside Inverness.

In 1921 he married Daisy, the daughter of an Inverness jeweller and in the 1920s he started to publish his short stories. His first novel was published in 1926 and in between 1926 – 1954 he wrote 20 novels. He became friends with many other Scottish literary figures and increasingly involved in politics – both socialism and independence for Scotland.

In 1931 his book, *Morning Tide* was published. This and many of his other novels are rooted in Highland life and traditions. The continuous contact he had throughout his life with his own land and its people gave his books a special quality. He believed that government support should be

provided to the Highlands to provide employment and stop the way of life and the Gaelic and Scots languages disappearing. (he himself spoke only English)

Because of the success of **Highland River**, Neil was able to support himself and Daisy financially from his writing and gave up work as an Excise Officer and his house in Inverness. He bought an old boat with a dodgy engine. Even though he knew very little about seamanship he spent the summer living on the boat and sailing round the west coast of Scotland, often having to be helped out when he got into trouble! After the summer he moved to Brae Farmhouse just outside Dingwall where he wrote many of his most important works. That is why the Neil Gunn Trust has erected a memorial near there, at a place where Neil took a walk every day after he had finished writing for the day. As well as writing novels he was a journalist and broadcaster.

That was a snapshot of my story.

When I was your age, I wrote about what I knew: my country, our customs, and my friends.

Life is very different today to what it was like when I was your age. You will probably write about different things and in a different way.

I hope that you enjoy writing. It is a great way to relax, to express yourself and to help others and even to change the world that you live in!

The worst thing that you write is better than the best thing that you did not write.

So, write, write, write!

(Not Neil Gunn's words)



"Everything was very quiet and still"

That is the theme for your piece of writing.