A Brief History of PEN International

By Cathal Sheerin

Today, PEN is recognised as the world's foremost association of writers and as a leading expert on freedom of expression. With a professional staff working from its London base, a network of 140 autonomous Centres spread across 100 countries, and approximately 40,000 members (all of whom are writers), PEN defends – and often provides essential support to – those who are persecuted for their writing. Defying the old stereotype of writers – that they are reclusive, antisocial, focused solely on the text before them – PEN engages energetically with the world, not just grappling with history but making it: *writing* it. PEN has tackled almost every imaginable threat to freedom of expression, including fascism, Stalinist repression, apostasy, criminal defamation, the abuse of anti-terrorism laws, censorship, legislation restricting LGBTQI expression and digital surveillance. PEN's influence is felt by individual governments, its expertise recognised by the United Nations.

Passionately internationalist in outlook, a champion of the underdog and no stranger to fierce and principled argument, 100 years after it was established PEN continues to embody the spirit of its remarkable founder, the English writer Catharine Amy Dawson Scott.

This is a version of PEN's unfinished story.

Forged in Adversity

"When after the war the propaganda machines of the countries involved stopped working, there was left behind, from all the lies, confusion of intellect and heart and a wall of hate….Mrs Dawson Scott made a courageous attempt to break through this wall of hate and to remind the writers of the enemy countries of the brotherhood of the intellect and the mutual way of life…Only those who can remember the atmosphere after the war can appreciate what she achieved." Ernst Toller, German playwright (1934).

Photograph of the founder of PEN Catharine Amy Dawson Scott in 1930.

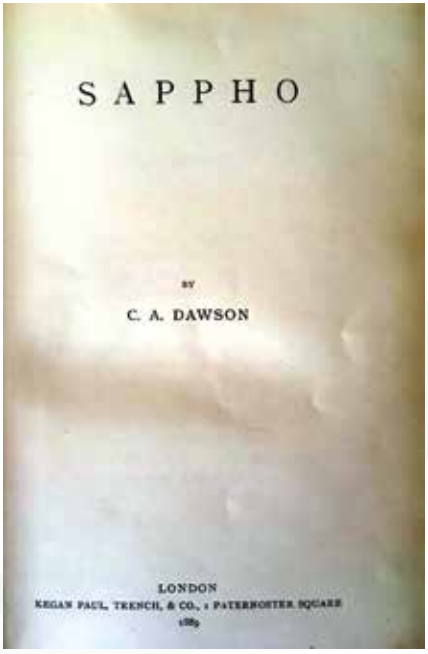
Strong, resourceful characters are forged in adversity. According to her daughter, Marjorie Watts, Catharine Amy Dawson Scott "never admitted to any happy childhood memories at all." The eldest child of a deeply unstable marriage, she was witness to – and victim of – extraordinarily violent rows between her father and mother, in which her mother, drunk, would attack her husband with a carving knife and then set about her two daughters with a riding crop. Scott's mother died when her eldest child was nine years old; her father's second marriage was also an unhappy one.

Unsurprisingly given her childhood, Scott developed into an impulsive, quick-tempered, rebellious adolescent, forever questioning the 'wisdom' of her elders. She was remarkably intelligent too, and her literary aspirations were evident early on. Her first published poem appeared in 1889, when she was twenty-four years old; it was called 'Sappho' and was an epic calling on women to strive for their intellectual and educational freedom.

Scott was devoted to literature and writing, but, perhaps more than anything, she was a 'doer' – one of those stimulating, dynamic personalities that make things happen. Before PEN, she had already set up two different organisations.

The first of these was the Women's Defence Relief Corps (WDRC), which she founded shortly after the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. The purpose of the WDRC was to increase the number of women in work and thereby enable more men to enlist in the army. Later, disillusioned by the horrors of war, Scott handed over the WDRC to be managed by others.

The second organisation that she founded, the To-Morrow Club, grew out of her literary work during the war years. Launched in 1917, the simple purpose of the To-Morrow Club was to encourage young writers in their work. At the Club's first meeting Scott met the writer and lawyer John Galsworthy, who would later be fundamental to the development and direction of PEN as an international organisation.


SAPPHO

BY

C. A. DAWSON

LONDON

KEGAN PAUL, TRENCH, & CO., 1 PATERNOSTER SQUARE

1889

Title page of *Sappho* by Catharine Amy Dawson Scott (1889)

From Idea to Reality

"Even as individuals become families and families become communities, and communities become nations, so eventually must the nations draw together in peace. In this faith I founded PEN in October 1921." Catharine Dawson Scott, Berlin Congress (1926)

According to Scott, the idea for PEN came to her while she was writing her novel, They Green Stones, in Cornwall, in the summer of 1921. Her letters to her daughter from this time are full of bouncy enthusiasm about her new project – PEN – which she would transform from mere daydream to impressive reality within a few months

Originally known as the P.E.N. Club (P.E.N. was an acronym for Poet, Playwright, Editor, Novelist), PEN was intended to be a dining club for international writers, where friendship and intellectual cooperation would be promoted. The new organisation would be launched at a dinner at the Florence Restaurant in Soho, London, on 5 October 1921.

Towards the end of the summer in 1921, Scott began to approach writers about the dinner. Among those who confirmed their attendance was John Galsworthy, who responded: "Anything that makes for international understanding and peace is to the good." Galsworthy would become PEN's first international president, a role he was initially reluctant to accept. In many ways the complete opposite of Scott – he was reserved and deliberate whereas she was forthright and impulsive – Galsworthy shared the PEN founder's passionate internationalism.

Photograph of Marjorie Watts in Women's Defence Relief Corps uniform in 1916.

In total, 44 writers attended the inaugural dinner and all signed up to become members of PEN. Internationalism was an essential part of the organisation's outlook and, at this first dinner, decisions were taken about how to contact writers beyond England with a view to setting up PEN Centres in other countries. The dinner also saw the first honorary PEN memberships awarded (at this stage, to Thomas Hardy, Maxim Gorky, Anatole

France, Knut Hamsun and others). This tradition continues today, although honorary memberships are now more likely to be bestowed upon persecuted or imprisoned writers: examples from recent years include Azimjon Askarov (Kyrgyzstan), Raif Badawi (Saudi Arabia), Tal Al-Mallouhi (Syria), Dawit Isaak (Eritrea), Ahmet Altan (Turkey) and Liu Xia (China).

The PEN idea proved to be contagious. By 1922, PEN Centres had been founded in Norway, Sweden, France, Italy, Romania, Belgium (French-speaking), Catalonia, and New York. Such was the level of international interest by late 1922 that Scott and Galsworthy decided to hold a special dinner on 1 May 1923 in London, to which all of PEN's Britain-based members, its honorary members, and a handful of guests from each of its established Centres abroad would be invited. This became PEN's first annual International Congress. The following Congress would take place in New York, the one after that in Paris.

Formative Challenges

"We are going to have great trouble in the near future. We are the Mother Society, and the P.E.N. Club, wherever it is, must be the club of free rights…I think I have the sense of the society when I can say that it is only free pens throughout the world that can maintain at any sacrifice the traditions of the great republic of literature which is so much greater than any political organisation." HG Wells, International President of PEN (1933-36 and 1941-46)

From its inception, PEN was intended to be a non-political organisation. But individuals' definitions of the 'political' vary, and disagreements between PEN Centres – and indeed between members within the same centre – still arise today over particular campaigns, statements or other actions.

During the 1920s, as PEN Centres increased in number (by the end of the decade there would be over 40 of them), attracting members from different countries and intellectual backgrounds, it was inevitable that politics would come knocking at PEN's door. By the time the Nazis took power in Germany in 1933, politics was threatening to kick the door off its hinges.

Tensions between PEN and its German centre were already in evidence at the Berlin Congress of 1926, when a group of young German writers, including Bertolt Brecht, Robert Musil and Ernst Toller, raised their concerns that German PEN did not represent the true face of German literature. Toller, a young Jewish playwright who would go into exile when the Nazis came to power, insisted that PEN could not ignore politics.

Photograph of some of the guests at the first PEN dinner, London, 1923. © Marjorie-Ann Watts

At least in part to address questions about the role of a writers' association in Europe's increasingly fraught political climate, the 1927 Brussels Congress approved the PEN Charter. Comprised of three simple articles, the Charter stressed that literature should be apolitical in nature and that PEN members "should at all times use what influence they have in favour of good understanding and mutual respect between nations." The Charter would be reviewed in later years but its essential spirit would remain the same.

However, with the rise of the Nazis in Germany, and of fascism in Spain and Italy, it became increasingly difficult for PEN to stay away from the political; in 1931, the PEN London Committee made a public 'Appeal to All Governments', which protested the plight of those imprisoned for political or religious reasons.

Two years later, the 1933 Dubrovnik Congress would witness one of the most famous and dramatic confrontations of PEN's early history – one which would lead to the expulsion of a Nazi-sympathising German PEN.

The German centre had dismissed news of the persecution of intellectuals in Germany as "alarmist"; it had failed to protest book burnings by the Nazi Party; it had also reportedly been circulating anti-Semitic pamphlets. The new

International President of PEN, HG Wells, faced a big challenge. As the Manchester Guardian reported at the time:

> *"It is ironical that a meeting of writers pledged to stand aside from politics should have been the occasion of one of the stormiest of political demonstrations. The burning of books in Germany and the fact that the greater number of well-known German writers are living in exile cannot be ignored by an association which has always worked for the free interchange of ideas through literature…Mr HG Wells had the most impossible task of keeping politics out of the discussion, of pacifying the more excitable delegates who were burning to attack the Hitler regime…"*

The German delegation failed to answer questions put to it about its recent conduct and attempted to prevent Ernst Toller from speaking about the realities of life in Nazi Germany; when Wells overruled German objections to giving Toller the floor, their delegation walked out. The following day Toller, whose sister and brother would later be sent to a concentration camp, addressed the remaining PEN delegates. Decrying the "madness" and "barbarism" of the era, he called on PEN members to "fight" to free "mankind from lies and injustice." The German PEN centre was formerly expelled a short time later. It was only re-established in 1948.

Photograph of PEN members at the 11th PEN International Congress in Dubrovnik, 1933.

The persecution of the Jews in Poland was on the agenda for the 1938 Prague Congress, where PEN members passed various resolutions condemning all forms of persecution, including anti- Semitism. The French poet Jules Romains, who had now succeeded Wells as International President of PEN, and who would later flee to exile when the German army invaded France, made a passionate statement underlining PEN's responsibility to the truth in the face of the growing political repression in Europe:

> *"Sometimes we are accused of pushing politics. How naïve and hypocritical! We want nothing better than to leave politics alone, providing that it leaves us alone. By asking us not to see the huge, untold consequences affecting our most valuable and high minded interests, and actions that are political by their very origin and repercussions, we are asked to be more ignorant and blinder than is even possible."*

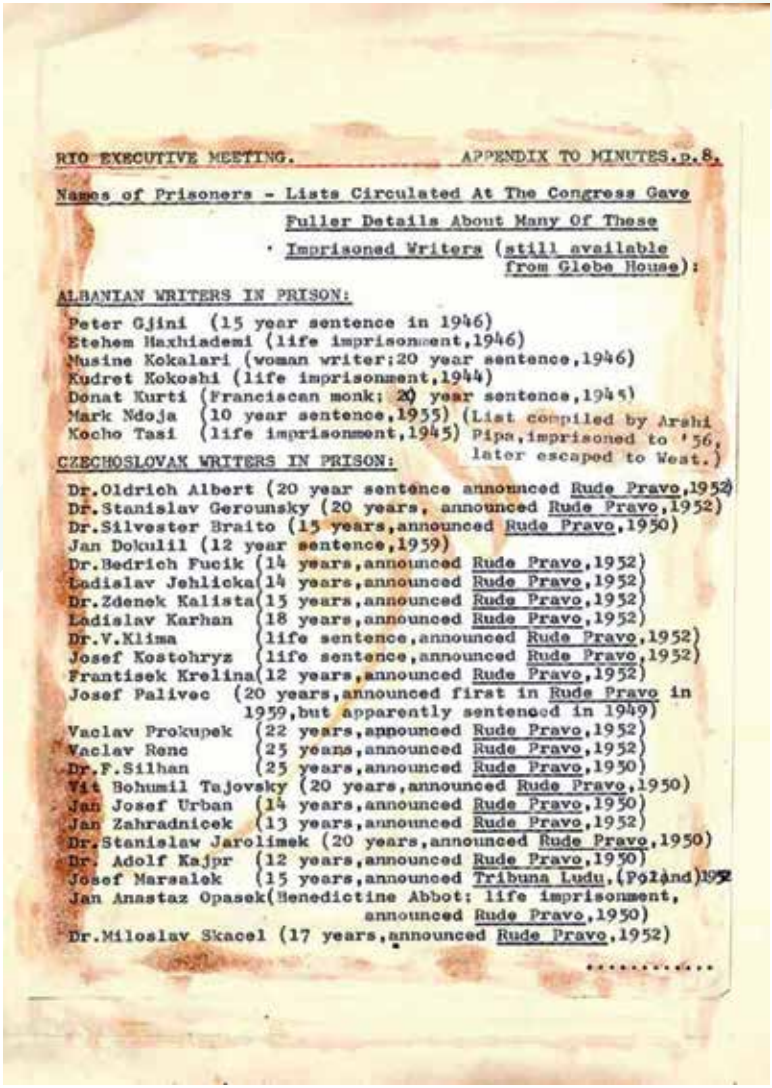
The years leading up to the Second World War saw the beginning of PEN's evolution into an activist organisation. During this period, PEN members began collecting information about writers who were suffering persecution and sent money and food parcels to those in need of assistance. When war broke out, numerous writers fleeing conflict and persecution sought refuge in London, where PEN provided financial, social and moral support. These early efforts by PEN members laid the groundwork for much of what PEN does today.

A New Order

"...to rekindle the Hope in Mankind which these dark years of Terror have almost extinguished." PEN resolution, Stockholm Congress (1946).

The years between the First and Second World Wars had been formative ones for PEN. Lofty ideals about literature and writers being above politics had been challenged by the ruthlessness and brutality of fascism. As a result, PEN would emerge from the war a slightly different kind of organisation.

One of the biggest challenges PEN post-war faced was how to deal with writers who had collaborated with the Nazis and other fascist regimes. Among members, the desire for retribution was strong. At the Stockholm Congress of 1946, a majority of delegates supported a Dutch proposal that the various PEN Centres should swap blacklists of those who had collaborated with the Nazis, even though PEN's longest serving International Secretary, Hermon Ould, argued that such an act ran contrary to PEN's principles.



RIO EXECUTIVE MEETING. APPENDIX TO MINUTES.p.8.

Names of Prisoners - Lists Circulated At The Congress Gave Fuller Details About Many Of These Imprisoned Writers (still available from Globe House):

ALBANIAN WRITERS IN PRISON:

Peter Gjini (15 year sentence in 1946)
Etehem Haxhiademi (life imprisonment,1946)
Musine Kokalari (woman writer;20 year sentence,1946)
Kudret Kokoshi (life imprisonment,1944)
Donat Kurti (Franciscan monk; 20 year sentence,1945)
Mark Ndoja (10 year sentence,1955) (List compiled by Arshi
Kocho Tasi (life imprisonment,1945) Pipa,imprisoned to '56,
later escaped to West.)

CZECHOSLOVAK WRITERS IN PRISON:

Dr.Oldrich Albert (20 year sentence announced Rude Pravo,1952)
Dr.Stanislav Gerounsky (20 years, announced Rude Pravo,1952)
Dr.Silvester Braito (15 years,announced Rude Pravo,1950)
Jan Dokulil (12 year sentence,1959)
Dr.Bedrich Fucik (14 years,announced Rude Pravo,1952)
Ladislav Jehlicka(14 years,announced Rude Pravo,1952)
Dr.Zdenek Kalista(15 years,announced Rude Pravo,1952)
Ladislav Karhan (18 years,announced Rude Pravo,1952)
Dr.V.Klima (life sentence,announced Rude Pravo,1952)
Josef Kostohryz (life sentence,announced Rude Pravo,1952)
Frantisek Krelina(12 years,announced Rude Pravo,1952)
Josef Palivec (20 years,announced first in Rude Pravo in 1959,but apparently sentenced in 1949)
Vaclav Prokupek (22 years,announced Rude Pravo,1952)
Vaclav Renc (25 years,announced Rude Pravo,1952)
Dr.F.Silhan (25 years,announced Rude Pravo,1950)
Vit Bohumil Tajovsky (20 years,announced Rude Pravo,1950)
Jan Josef Urban (14 years,announced Rude Pravo,1950)
Jan Zahradnicek (13 years,announced Rude Pravo,1952)
Dr.Stanislav Jarolimek (20 years,announced Rude Pravo,1950)
Dr. Adolf Kajpr (12 years,announced Rude Pravo,1950)
Josef Marsalek (15 years,announced Tribuna Ludu,(Poland)1952
Jan Anastaz Opasek(Benedictine Abbot: life imprisonment, announced Rude Pravo,1950)
Dr.Miloslav Skacel (17 years,announced Rude Pravo,1952)

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Typed appendix containing PEN International's first Case List, 1960, Rio de Janeiro.
© PEN International

Also at the Stockholm Congress, two important resolutions were passed aligning PEN with the nascent international order taking form under the influence of the United Nations (UN). These resolutions were pledges to "the principle of unhampered thought" and to "dispel race, class, and national hatreds and champion the ideal of one humanity living in peace in one world." These much broader commitments to peace, non-discrimination and freedom of expression would later be incorporated into the PEN Charter.

PEN's influence and reputation as an organisation defending writers was by now well-recognised. UN members consulted the PEN Charter when they were drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; in 1949, PEN acquired special consultative status at the UN as "representatives of the writers of the world."

Defending Writers in a Polarised World

"So this was my function: to be fair, to keep the peace, and to persist in apolitically advancing the political concepts of liberty of expression and the independent author."
Arthur Miller, International President of PEN (1965-69)

In the 1930s and 1940s, PEN had devoted much energy to what would eventually become the work for which it is best known: providing support to, and campaigning for, persecuted writers. The 1930s saw some high-profile interventions, including a successful campaign in 1937 for the release from a fascist prison in Spain of Hungarian writer and journalist Arthur Koestler.

PEN's work on behalf of writers at risk during these years, though energetic and passionate, needed to become more organised and systematic. Attempts to do this began in the 1950s, fuelled in no small part by the impact of the Cold War on freedom of expression in Eastern Europe and beyond. These efforts bore fruit in 1960, with the founding of the Writers in Prison Committee (WiPC).

The WiPC's purpose was simple: to take up the case of any writer who had been persecuted for his/her writing. At its first meeting (the Rio de Janeiro Congress in 1960), the WiPC considered thirty cases of persecuted writers from around the world and presented five lists of writers detained in Albania, France, Romania, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. In the decades that followed, PEN would take up the cases of countless writers, journalists and others – across the Americas, Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia – who had been targeted for exercising their right to free expression. In 1989, PEN members formally mandated the WiPC to represent PEN at the UN Human Rights Commission (now the Human Rights Council).

PEN would go on to establish further standing committees devoted to its key concerns in other areas, including the Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee (1978), the Writers for Peace Committee (1984) and the Woman Writers' Committee (1991), but the majority of its human rights activities would be driven by, or based on, the work of the WiPC.

Once again, PEN's challenge during the Cold War was how to respond to

the threats to freedom of expression that were rooted in politics – but without taking a 'political' position. PEN's reputation and influence made it very attractive to various political actors who viewed the organisation as a potential vehicle from which to promote a particular agenda. The experience with German PEN in the 1930s, and another one with Hungarian PEN in the 1950s (where the centre refused to provide information to PEN members who were trying to support writers imprisoned by the Soviet-backed Hungarian government), showed that PEN Centres were sometimes in danger of infiltration by political factions or groups that worked against PEN's principles.

In his memoir, Timebends (1987), former International President of PEN Arthur Miller recounts a 1967 journey to the USSR, where he met with the Union of Soviet Writers. Miller had been encouraged to believe that some of these writers were interested in joining PEN (which would have been an important, symbolic event at the time), but his high hopes were dashed when it became clear that they would only join if significant changes were made to the PEN Charter. Deflated, Miller realised that "they would never agree to mitigate censorship in Russia, much less protest it," and wondered, perhaps with good reason, "was their wish to join PEN a mere campaign of disguised aggression?" (It would be more than twenty years before a Russian PEN centre was finally established.)

But attempts to infiltrate PEN didn't just come from the Soviet Union. Frances Stonor Saunders' book, Who Paid the Piper (1999), reveals that the CIA – aware of PEN's cultural power and anxious to prevent Soviet agents from penetrating the organisation – inserted at least one agent (and possibly other individuals associated with the CIA) into PEN during the 1960s.

Dispelling Hatreds and Defending Free Speech

"There can be no justification for using violence to silence or intimidate those who speak out, no matter how offensive their views." PEN statement following the attack on Charlie Hebdo magazine (2015)

In the years immediately following the end of the Cold War, PEN saw itself reprise a role it had taken on during the Second World War, by providing support to writers who were forced into exile – or who were stranded in conflict zones – during the Yugoslav Wars (1991-95) and the Kosovo War (1998-99). PEN continued this work in the new millennium, when waves of writers and journalists began fleeing a Middle East destabilised by multiple, devastating conflicts.

PEN's most high-profile case in the 1980s was that of the writer Salman Rushdie. In 1989, Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa calling for Rushdie's death because he had supposedly insulted Islam in his novel, The Satanic Verses. PEN campaigned alongside other rights organisations to have the fatwa lifted, and also supported publishers of the novel worldwide. The declaration of the fatwa sparked riots and book burnings in various countries; translators and publishers were attacked, including the publisher and current Norwegian PEN board member, William Nygaard, who survived an assassination attempt in Oslo in 1993.

The clash between religious rules and the right to freedom of expression would continue to make its presence felt in PEN's work in the decades following the Rushdie affair. Defending writers accused of blasphemy became a significant feature of PEN's protection work in the Middle East, Asia and parts of Africa.

However, there was (and is) a tension between the PEN Charter's commitment to freedom of expression and its requirement that members work for "good understanding and mutual respect between nations… [that] they pledge themselves to do their utmost to dispel race, class and national hatreds." This was highlighted in the aftermath of the January 2015 massacre at the Paris office of the magazine Charlie Hebdo.

Apparently in response to the magazine's satirical treatment of Islam and the prophet Muhammad, two Islamist gunmen murdered 12 staff members and wounded another 11. PEN brought its Centres together in a fierce public condemnation of the attack and underlined its commitment to freedom of expression. However, although PEN members were united in denouncing the killings, the tension between the right to freedom of expression and the pledge to dispel hatreds rose to the surface when Charlie Hebdo received a free expression award from American PEN a few months after the attack: two dozen writers, including members of American PEN, criticised it as a reward for mocking a "section of the French population that is already marginalized, embattled, and victimized," rather than viewing it as an act of solidarity.

One Hundred Years On

With a professional staff in its London head office since the 1980s and a network of Centres around the world managed mainly by volunteers, PEN's work defending writers and freedom of expression has both broadened and deepened in recent decades. PEN produces expert reports on countries or regions where writers are under particular threat (recent subjects include digital

PEN Case Enoh Meyomesse interviewed during an event organised by the Belgian Dutch-Speaking Centre. © Belgian Dutch-Speaking Centre

surveillance in Turkey, criminal defamation in Africa, legislative suppression of free speech in India, censorship in Venezuela and the general stifling of freedom of expression in China and Russia). It continues its tradition of high-level missions, trial observations and prison visits. It has also expanded its protection work for writers, collaborating with PEN Netherlands' Emergency Fund, the International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN), and others. High profile campaigns such as 'Write Against Impunity' (2012), which brought Latin American writers together to protest impunity in the region, and 'Out in the Cold' (2014), which called for the lifting of laws repressing free expression in Russia, have also become a headline-grabbing feature of PEN's work.

As PEN enters the third decade of the 21st century, it can boast not only of all of the above, but also of its work supporting indigenous, LGBTQI and women's voices, and of its flourishing Civil Society Programme, which promotes literacy and literature in education around the world.

Catharine Amy Dawson Scott would probably be astounded by the growth of her organisation – as well as by the scope of its interests – but she would no doubt recognise the same principles driving the work as when she established PEN a century ago.

The PEN Charter

The PEN Charter affirms that:

Literature knows no frontiers and must remain common currency among people in spite of political or international upheavals.

In all circumstances, and particularly in time of war, works of art, the patrimony of humanity at large, should be left untouched by national or political passion.

Members of PEN should at all times use what influence they have in favour of good understanding and mutual respect between nations and people; they pledge themselves to do their utmost to dispel all hatreds and to champion the ideal of one humanity living in peace and equality in one world.

PEN stands for the principle of unhampered transmission of thought within each nation and between all nations, and members pledge themselves to oppose any form of suppression of freedom of expression in the country and community to which they belong, as well as throughout the world wherever this is possible. PEN declares for a free press and opposes arbitrary censorship in time of peace. It believes that the necessary advance of the world towards a more highly organised political and economic order renders a free criticism of governments, administrations and institutions imperative. And since freedom implies voluntary restraint, members pledge themselves to oppose such evils of a free press as mendacious publication, deliberate falsehood and distortion of facts for political and personal ends.

The Charter of PEN International has guided, unified and inspired its members for over 70 years. It was approved at the 1948 PEN Congress in Copenhagen.

PEN Bangladesh

Bangladesh PEN Centre proudly represent the PEN International PEN which was founded in 1921 to promote Friendship and understanding and to unite the writers & Journalists all over the world.

The history of PEN Bangladesh goes back to Pakistan period. PEN Pakistan was established in 1948. After the independence of Bangladesh, PEN Pakistan was transformed into PEN Bangladesh in 1972. The first president of PEN Pakistan was the renowned scholar, writer and linguist Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah, and the first General Secretary was the distinguished writer and poet Prof Syed Ali Ahsan. In Bangladesh period Syed Ali Ahsan became the first president of PEN Bangladesh. After that eminent writer Ms. Farida Hossain became the president of PEN Bangladesh till the year 2017. Then eminent writer and literary critic Syed Manzoorul Islam was elected president of PEN Bangladesh for the session 2018-2020 at the organisation's 45th Annual General Meeting. At present PEN Bangladesh is headed by internationally acclaimed writer Dr. Kazi Anis Ahmed.

PEN Bangladesh, deeply engaged in exchanging cultural activities and literary works amongst their members spread over 140 Countries of the world.

PEN Bangladesh regularly participate in the International PEN congress, seminar and literary meetings organized by PEN International where. This gives the Bangladeshi writers an opportunity to be part of free flow of the international literature.

PEN Bangladesh Centre regularly observe special program on the occasions of National days, birth and death anniversary of literary personalities and organizes seminar and literary activities in different part of the country. PEN Bangladesh centre specially organizes workshop and seminars for junior writers and encourage them to be the part of the centre.

We also believe that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion without interference and to seek, receive and impart information through any media and regardless of frontiers.

PEN Bangladesh
Executive Committee-2021-2023

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Executive Member
Masud Hasan

PEN Bangladesh Photo Gallery

46th PEN Bangladesh Annual General Meeting 2019

Prize Giving Ceremony of Under-35 Writing Competition 2020

Dialogue on World Refugee Day 2018

PEN Bangladesh Photo Gallery

Caption

Book Stall at Dhaka Lit Fest 2019

Caption

PEN Bangladesh Photo Gallery

International Mother Language Day 2020

Seminar and Poetry reading program on National Victory Day 2019

PEN Bangladesh organized Story Telling Program at ULAB

PEN Bangladesh Photo Gallery

Meet the Young Writers, Polytechnic University of the Philippines, PEN Congress 2019

PEN International Gathering at Babashaheb Ambedker College, Pune, India, 2018

PEN International Writers For Peace Committee Meeting, Paris, France, 2020

PEN Bangladesh Photo Gallery

PEN International Writers in Prison Committee Meeting, Zagreb, Croatia, 2023

PEN International Writers in Prison Committee, Zagreb, Croatia, 2023

Caption