

## **BLETHERS AUTUMN 2006**

### **Joyous day as Scotland welcomes a world 'First'**

Guests from many sections of Scottish life welcomed the opening of the first Storytelling Centre in the world by Patricia Ferguson, Minister for Arts and Culture in the Scottish Parliament. The ringing of the Netherbow Bell, blessings from many parts of the world and speeches by a range of well-wishers, marked a memorable day which has begun a new chapter in the life of Scotland's capital.

Congratulating and commending the Forum and the Church of Scotland on a tremendous project from which the whole of Scotland will benefit, the Minister said the impressive ceremony to mark the opening was a fitting signal that storytelling in Scotland is as alive and relevant today as ever.

"One of the oldest, most basic, and most inclusive of the arts, I am delighted that it has seen such a vigorous growth over the past 15 years. I think it is no mere coincidence that this timeline matches the establishment of the Scottish Storytelling Forum. I think hearty congratulations to the Forum are due.

"As Minister for Arts and Culture, I recognise how important storytelling is to our culture, our education, our entertainment. It is an inspiration and encouragement to our imagination and our knowledge. The stories we hear when young are our first stepping stones to learning about the world and to forming our own stories". Scotland's literary heritage is second to none she said, and the designation of Edinburgh as the first UNESCO City of Literature is testament to that.

"Here, now, in the heart of this city, we have a Centre which will provide a tremendous facility and support to ensure that Scotland's literature has a base from which it can grow and maintain its high level of regard internationally." The Minister continued: "Storytelling is a natural base for so many artforms - literature, theatre, visual arts, dance, music - they are all trying to tell a story using a different medium. I am sure that the Scottish Storytelling Centre, working with local authorities, schools, libraries and others will be a key resource in developing Scotland's cultural future".

### **Celtic connections inspire Capital Festival**

The 17th Scottish International Storytelling Festival this year draws on time of the Scotland and Ireland's rich heritage of story, music and song. With storytelling, theatre, visual arts and family events taking place at the Storytelling Centre and further afield, it is a perfect opportunity to hear some of the finest Scottish and Irish storytellers, soak up the ceilidh atmosphere, develop your skills

and hold your own storytelling event. The Festival runs from October 25th to November 5th.

It begins with a series of events in the great Celtic tradition, featuring well-loved tales of Tristan and Isolde, Finn McCool and Bride and Angus. Visual art is strongly represented at the Centre, the theme being "Calum Colvin's Ossian" series, appearing in the Storytelling Court from October 10th to the 30th. From October 29th the Festival welcomes nine guest Irish storytellers. Events over the following week draw on centuries of Scottish-Irish migration and cultural exchange, and the resulting legacy of shared story and tradition. Also celebrated is the Feast of Samhain or All Hallows Eve, and the last weekend, November 3rd to 5th focuses on Traveller traditions, with storytelling, book and film events.

From "Afro-Celtic Night" to "Across the Water: Music, Migrants and Song", the Festival will highlight the diversity and richness of oral traditions within Scottish and Irish communities.

The Festival will draw on Edinburgh as an "Inspiring Capital" – a fitting theme as our new "house of stories" on the Royal Mile partners city organisations including Edinburgh Refugee Centre, Edinburgh World Heritage and the National Museums of Scotland.

Public events are just part of the programme. There will be plenty of opportunities to satisfy your curiosity about storytelling and hone your skills as a storyteller through an extended programme of workshops, training and seminar events. From "Step by Step" for beginners, to "The Conyach" master-class for more experienced tellers, there's something for everyone. The schools outreach programme will build on the success of previous years and allow children to work with a real live storyteller.

### **Storytelling Radio Is On The Net**

A casual conversation at the opening of the new Storytelling Centre about how easy it must be now to set up your own Internet radio station led Glasgow stories Ewan McVicar to go home and start mousing the Web for details. On Scottish Storytelling, accessible if you have broadband, you can now hear over five hours of storytelling from current Scots tellers, at last count 19 of them with two stories each.

If you don't have broadband, try Storytellers Scotland, with 90 minutes of recordings of stories, plus a few sung ballads. The sequence changes weekly, and has featured recordings from the School of Scottish Studies archives and from Alan Lomax's 1950s recording trips, old tales retold by Falkirk schoolchildren last

year, Duncan Williamson and Stanley Robertson's recordings for Kyloe Records, and many other gems.

To begin listening, go to [www.live365.com](http://www.live365.com), browse for Scottish Storytelling, and follow the story trail. And if you have recordings of stories that you could be broadcast, Ewan would like to know.

### **International event lifts profile of Glasgow stories**

Gramafon, a Russian cafe in King St, the Merchant City, was the scene of an event to raise the profile of storytelling in Glasgow.

A Russian "country" style meal was provided by Julia Atlas who runs the cafe, and there were plenty of stories from Michael Kerins and Marion Kenny. Marion and Joe Sanderson and duo Craig Smillie and Graham Bryce provided the music. Even a glass of wine was "thrown in" the price of £10 and the cafe was packed to capacity.

"After the meal we were royally entertained by the storytellers and musicians" says Rachel Smillie. "The evening culminated in a brilliant telling of 'Blue Hair, Black Hair' by Michael, beautifully accompanied by Marion on the gu jung, a Chinese harp."

Afterwards, the comments made by the delighted audience included: "It's such a hassle to find babysitters on a Friday night that I usually can't be bothered, but I really loved this evening, and am so glad I made the effort"; "What a different sort of evening - it was fantastic! Let's have some more" ; "I would have paid more a lot for such an excellent evening - really first class!"

Rachel feels that the success of the programme means it could be replicated at various times at intimate cafes across the city to achieve the promotional aims.

### **Literary links with European schools**

A thrilling storytelling project which links the nations is underway in Aberdeen thanks to the enthusiastic pupils of Kittybrewster Primary School. The young pupils have joined with five schools in Majorca, Lithuania, and Turkey to try to help parents to be more involved in their children's education.

"Storytelling seemed to be a very natural thing to encourage", says Grace Banks who is promoting the scheme. "The idea was to tell the children and their parents a story, accompanied by some simple pictures in a simple book form, which they could take home to tell between them.

Though there was some difficulty in Majorca because many of the large immigrant Spanish population do not speak the local Catalan dialect which is spoken in the schools, a new approach is being tried says Grace.

"When the teachers met together they decided that in Kittybrewster the P4 - 7s would have a storytelling competition which involves creating their own stories, telling them to the junior classes and then the best being put on video. This can then be sent over to the other schools and vice versa."

Grace has been involved in telling stories, and giving a showcase to visiting teachers from Norway as well as helping the pupils develop their own skills. Ann Graham, the P2 teacher at Kittybrewster." is very enthusiastic. "The project is sprouting arms and legs" she says.

### **In the chair**

Colin Mackay had his "Hans" full during the bicentenary celebrations of the great storyteller, Hans Christian Andersen. He appeared at the official exhibition and told stories at special events.

### **Have you heard the one about the moose?**

Following the death three years ago of his father, a great storyteller himself, James Spence has wanted to gather stories from Jedburgh where he grew up and its old characters. Now, a professional development bursary for £5,000 from the National Lottery Scottish Arts Council fund is allowing him to do just that. Jedburgh, or Jethart as the locals call it, has one of the richest Scots dialects, and no lack of history. Few stories have been gathered from this area, certainly the School of Scottish Studies has nothing and since mid-May James has been spending two days a week there and finding the task of gathering stories harder than he anticipated.

"But there is no doubt that when people get together in a group they are able to spark each other. Also the more stories I tell myself, the more I get back."

Now James is finding that word is getting round locally, and a former neighbour recently stopped his car to tell him a story about Rob the lion and Watt the moose. "As well as gathering stories for use in my own work, I hope to stir Jethart folk to getting back to telling more of their stories, more often", says James.

### **'Life Stories' get new Centre off to a memorable start**

Third-age group attracts the crowds

"Life Stories" have completed their most successful project to date in the North East of Edinburgh, undertaking visits to sixty different older people's groups. They had just stopped to take a breath when they were, off again to entertain mature audiences for three days at the newly opened Storytelling Centre. One hundred and eighty people attended the three afternoon shows.

These exceptional audience figures testify to just how successful "Life Stories" have become. Everywhere the group goes with their storytelling and reminiscence work they are invited back. Definitely storytelling for the third age. "Sixpence for the Gallery", the first show, was devoted to popular stories, most of them humorous, from the vintage age of variety, early cinema, theatre and dance-hall etiquette. The storytellers, John Fee, Jack Martin, Noel Cochrane and Millie Gray soon found a rapport with the audience which clamoured for more. Some were so impressed that they attended on the next two days too.

"Tales My Granny Told me" comprised childhood memories and experiences, told with humour and grace. The storytellers were Audrey Parks and Colin Mackay, who shared the time with two newcomers to "Life Stories", Marie-Louise Cochrane and Jackie Carothers. This foursome was a professional delight and it is hoped they will work together again very soon.

"The All Clear" was the final offering wartime memories and stories of how people survived the deprivations just after the war. John Fee, Jack Martin, Noel Cochrane and Millie Gray told of the courage shown during the war years and of the bravery which earned us freedom

The audience went out into the High Street with a song in their hearts and a smile on their faces.

The three afternoons proved so popular that director of the Storytelling Centre, Donald Smith proposes to have the team at the Storytelling Theatre every afternoon during the International Festival October, with a guest teller every day. "Life Stories" will move their activity to the West of Edinburgh in November December 2006 and January 2007.

The success of the project has exceeded everyone's expectations "Most probably this is due to the commitment of the team who really enjoy storytelling and reminiscence so that the older people feel they have been entertained by friends", says Millie, secretary to the group." "Another reason in my view, is our regular meetings where decisions are reached by all of us on how we proceed and how we spend the allocated grants. It is team work at its very best everyone has their say and everyone knows they have been listened to."

**Make it a Day Worth Remembering**

What a difference a day makes - and you can play your part on Tell-a-Story Day on Friday October 27th.

All you have to do is organise an event, publicise it locally and let the Storytelling Centre know what you are planning. That way you will have full support with posters, be included in the printed listing of all events and in the press launch which highlights the day throughout Scotland. This year the theme is Guys and Guisers Storytelling and Jill and Caroline at the Storytelling Centre are on hand to help you with your ideas.

In the spirit of the day it is hoped that organisers will offer free admission or ensure any voluntary donations are given to charity. Tell-a -Story Day, which began in 2001, falls in the Scottish International Storytelling Festival. The main themes this year being Edinburgh as an inspiring capital, while celebrating the links between Scotland and Ireland's traditions whereand history.

Contact [Jill@scottishstorytellingcentre.com](mailto:Jill@scottishstorytellingcentre.com) for your forms or see the web:

[www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk](http://www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk)

**“Work as if you were living in the early days of a better nation.”**

Could any directive be more fitting than Alasdair Gray's to mark the celebratory opening of the world's first purpose-built storytelling centre? Guests, passers-by, tourists and Old Town residents were aware that history was being made at one of the most important sites in Scotland's capital. Our photographers capture some of the atmosphere of June 1st 2006 when the building, which has already attracted widespread acclaim for its designers , Malcolm Fraser architects, was opened by the Minister for Tourism,Culture and Sport, Patricia Ferguson MSP. Council scheme calls in storytellers to help children in care .

In a society obsessed with high tech communication, storytelling is an age-old tradition that remains so valuable that one Scottish local authority has used the power of stories to help their children in care.

South Lanarkshire Council's psychological services team conducted research into the educational resilience of looked- after and accommodated children and young people. Three main themes were identified as providing workable pathways to positively promoting the experience which these children have in education. These were social competence and well-being, literacy and attachment.

The team investigated ways in which young people in care might be helped to build these aspects of their emotional resilience. It discovered that in one unit the young people had memories of enjoying storytelling events in Glasgow, to

which a member of staff had taken them. More discussion concluded that a storytelling project might be the way forward.

With financial support from a Scottish Executive grant, the team called in storytellers Ruth Kirkpatrick and Claire McNicol, with their Children 1st Storymakers training service. They developed a plan of intervention, initially with four of the council's eight residential units.

One of the great strengths of traditional storytelling they say, is its power to inspire both heart and mind. Traditional storytelling has the capacity to bring the intellect and the emotional life into balance. Claire and Ruth use therapeutic storytelling to meet a range of social and emotional needs in children including those in residential care.

An intensive programme of storytelling, workshops, training days for staff, mentoring, evaluation and craftwork followed. "At one session", they say "we had planned to tell a story in which a mother dies. We knew that two sisters in the unit had experienced the death of their mother a few years before and we felt that this story would help them make some sense of their loss." Though they found that the day of the story was the actual anniversary of the mother's death, they went ahead. "By the end of the story, which was full of hope, the young people were visibly lighter and relieved."

"When a young person listens to a story they continuously associate what they hear with their own memories. They search to connect their present experience of the story to events from the past," Ruth and Claire explain. "This process helps to explain why storytelling is such a powerful tool to use with young people who have experienced loss and trauma."

Storyworks will continue in the autumn with the other four units in South Lanarkshire and Irene Stevens of the Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care, who has been involved throughout the project, will produce an evaluation. It is hoped that this will show how the storytelling process can enhance aspects of emotional literacy. A DVD has been commissioned from Strangeboat Video Production Company, which, it is hoped, will record the process and demonstrate the power of storytelling at its most vivid.

Ruth and Claire have prepared a detailed report on Storyworks (Children 1st) and recently led a two-day training event, "The Listening Storyteller, a Journey in Reflective Practice". This form of intensive training could well set a pattern for future courses in storytelling techniques.

**Pledge now to save the planet**

Make a pledge to stop climate chaos - that's the challenge from the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh .

It is setting up partnerships with congregations of the Church of Scotland, companies and organisations to maximise awareness of climate change through a wide range of activities in October. Other groups, like Ideal Homes, will also be circulating the pledge cards and Oxfam is organising a political event.

Some of the storytelling workshops at the Garden will have climate change themes and there will be public lectures - all aimed at encouraging people to make some change in their own lives for the benefit of the climate. Keep your eyes open for the events. "We want to collect as many pledges as possible", says Mike Robinson, Head of Development at the Garden.

### **Looking ahead**

The Spring 2007 edition of Blethers will carry details of new projects and developments and if you have ideas for inclusion please send them to the editor at the Storytelling Centre by the end of the year.

### **Home And Away - Michael Responds To A Challenge**

The polar bears were indoors and the elephants on vodka to keep them warm. That's how cold it was at Moscow Zoo. A well known Glasgow storyteller told me - so that'll be right then.

Michael Kerins was on his seventh visit to Russia promoting sexual health among university students - a cause he supports through fund-raising, storytelling, promotion on his website and organising international writing competitions to encourage would-be authors and translators. His interest spreads to the Urals and to Perm, with its historic links to Scotland, and one of his latest efforts is sending writing materials for neglected children in charity shelters, where even a fourpenny pencil is a precious gift.

This autumn his commitment takes him back again to Perm and also to Yekaterinburg University - he also gave some of his best stories and talks on sexual health and prevention of AIDS at the invitation of the Anglophile Club. Many people in Glasgow are supporting him in these enterprises and if you would like to help look at the special website: [www.kerinsnaumov.com](http://www.kerinsnaumov.com) One of Michael's most challenging invitations recently however, came much nearer to home. He was asked by social worker, Irene Goodfellow, Counsellor and Work Development Co-ordinator Working Links in Glasgow to work alongside adults with multiple mental health and social problems, encourage them to tell their own stories and then produce something in print. Reluctantly at

first, and falteringly, a few joined in a workshop on vocabulary building before going on to character development. The group grew to twelve and became more involved and talkative, more excited about their own life stories. Together they produced a rare and treasured volume, a first edition of priceless value - "Reflections on Paris" -which tells their own stories in their own words – found with effort and captured with love. One of the first pieces by first-time writer Maureen Montgomery, was drawn at random and has been included in the international translation competition.

The experience was clearly a moving one and Glasgow Parkhead Working Links is an organisation well worth remembering.

Ann Davies

### **Warm welcome for Lanark's latest attraction**

Lanarkshire Storytellers is the latest group to be formed and is expected to have wide appeal throughout the area as well as to neighbouring districts in the west and south-west with which it already has close contacts.

A commitment to voluntary work with story clubs, Lanark Library and Community Service will continue and there is a wide spectrum of tellers among the membership.

Regular programmes will go ahead and some 'big ideas' theme days will be organised in North and South Lanarkshire. A special event is planned for Tell A Story Day in October. Training and mentoring arrangements are being made by Colin McAllister and the group will be invited to share future meetings with the Project and Resources Group at Pollok, Glasgow.

Margo Steele is the publicity officer (01555 660516) and Peter Stead, Chuck Warren and Jim Bryson are the chairman, secretary and treasurer. The Storytelling Centre website carries details.

### **Stars are born as storytellers turn moviemakers**

North Edinburgh Arts asked storyteller John Hamilton to take on a scheme with Pilton Youth and Children Project. Over ten after-school sessions, he worked with the Calm-it Club, a focused therapeutic session for primary age boys who have a range of behavioural difficulties and social isolation.

While storytelling did engage the boys straight away, it was not going to be enough to sustain interest over a prolonged period. "It seemed to me that

the key thing was to provide different activities each week, alongside the stories. These could be linked to build into the creation of stories," says John. The boys created their hero figures by making fabric hand puppets which really helped them concentrate on developing the characters, and they went on to create monsters to do battle with the heroes. They constructed these from clay. Once the characters were in place the setting of the stories was discussed and developed and plotlines established. John took digital photos of the puppets and clay models and started to create a simple animated film. When the boys saw their creations on a TV screen they were delighted and worked hard at developing the stories.

John turned the stories into the "Calm-it Club Movie" and added a musical score. The boys then recorded the dialogue and sound effects. Each of them got a copy of the movie on DVD to take home as a product they were very proud of. "It was great to see kids who normally have difficulty concentrating, getting totally absorbed in the process. The project was great fun and worked because of the tremendous support from the fantastic staff at PYCP," says John.

### **Inspiring stories from Jess and Sheila take to the road**

Storyteller friends, Jess Smith and Sheila Stewart worked alongside each other on an inspirational project which was the brainchild of The Traveller Education Service in Leeds and which will go into schools throughout England.

"Open Roads, Open Minds" is a learning resource pack of a storytelling DVD, paintings and music and, says Jess, it can be used across the curriculum, enriching learning in literacy, drama, art, music and history. Stories were told in schools and a theatre and then filmed. A gypsy artist painted the main characters from each tale in vibrant colour and all the stories were then recorded on DVD and in written form.

"The pack will help children promote their culture and can be a valuable tool for educational improvement and race equality", Jess says. "It can help to promote diversity of national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the UK among all ages. This resource will help promote the need for mutual respect."

The Traveller Education Service is to be commended for this massive undertaking."I am proud to have been part of this truly inspiring artform, and I know that my friend Sheila Stewart, who worked alongside me, feels the same. Many people took part in the making of the 'Open Roads Open Minds' project and I thank them all for their company".

### **Lots of Autumn books for storytellers' shelves**

## **'Take it on good authority' Director of the Centre, Donald Smith introduces new books**

Helen East is a fine storyteller well known in Scotland. In *The Singing Storycloth* (A & C Black £18.99) she has collaborated with others to produce a first-rate set of stories with accompanying ideas for music, artwork, puppetry, etc. The stories are all traditional and well-structured for repetition and participation. The publishers say for ages 3- 7 but I think 5-90 is more accurate!

*Fly, Pigeon, Fly* by John Henderson and Julia Donaldson grew out of a creative writing session in Easterhouse, Glasgow. It's a great story about the bond between a city kid and an injured bird. With excellent illustrations by Thomas Docherty it's just right for the recommended 4-7s. A storyteller could also use the pictures creatively. (Little Tiger Press, £10.99 (hardback,), £5.99 (paperback)).

The irrepressible Stuart McHardy has done it again with *The White Cockade* (Birlinn, £7.99), another in his series of themed Scottish stories. This time it's the Jacobites, and Stuart ranges wide to give the real human feel behind this romantic period. Plenty here for storytellers to adapt for their telling but also a good read.

Finally watch out this autumn for Sheila Stewart's life of her mother Belle, Sheila Douglas's book about the life and art of Willie McPhee and Jess Smith's first novel *Bruar's Rest* (Mercat Press). This is an epic love story which will attract more new fans already hooked on her autobiographical trilogy. These new books, from all three writers, will be featured in the Storytelling Festival in October.

The Centre acknowledges support from the Scottish Arts Council, the City of Edinburgh Council and the Church of Scotland