

BLETHERS SPRING 2005

John Knox House Comes to Life Again

'Inside Histories' A Special Role for Storytellers

The first part of the new Scottish Storytelling Centre to be released by the contractors is already at least 500 years old. John Knox House on Edinburgh's historic High Street will incorporate the new reception area and shop, with historic displays and education activities. It will reopen to the public in May of this year.

For about six months, the Storytelling Centre will occupy two of Edinburgh's oldest medieval buildings Moubray House and John Knox House next door until the new building is completed on the site of the former Netherbow Arts Centre. During these six months a special project "John Knox House: Inside Histories" will look at the story of the House, including the famous and not-so-famous people connected with it.

Talks, tours, storytelling sessions, new education features, interpretation and information on recent discoveries will be included in the project. 'Inside Histories' has been awarded a grant of £48,500 by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Further details are available from the Storytelling Centre.

Record-breaking Festival as pilot project takes off

More than 10,000 children took part in a schools outreach programme as part of the thirteenth Scottish International Storytelling Festival.

The record number of 118 storyteller visits to libraries, nurseries, primary and secondary schools, as well as sell-out education events at Edinburgh Castle, set the seal on a Festival full of innovation and initiatives and made it the most successful and best attended so far.

A one-off grant from the Scottish Arts Council National Lottery Fund allowed a strengthened approach to marketing which resulted in a high profile event on the theme of "Voyages and Migrations". Several new events were also piloted and a public survey undertaken on attitudes and perceptions of storytelling. The results will have an impact on future festivals.

New events included celebrations of local heritage and community life in Leith, sessions in homes for the elderly, churches, libraries and the Guru Nanak Gurdwara to hear Sikh stories. There were also Indian tales to celebrate Diwali and themed evenings at a local restaurant. Some eight training workshops were very popular.

The Festival Club attracted large numbers of enthusiasts, led by Duncan Williamson in his inimitable fashion.

The community events will be looked at closely as there is great potential for further programmes in local areas across the capital.

Web Site Success

The Storytelling Centre's web-site has been made 'web-site of the month' by the American Storytellers Network and commended for its educational advice.

Congratulations to our web co-ordinator Jill Bush – and to Beth Cross, the storytellers and the Story Makers for creative input.

Dates for your Diary

The fourteenth Scottish International Storytelling Festival will be held from Friday October 21st to Sunday October 30th 2005.

Meeting with a poet inspires life-saving project

Michael Kerins was killing an hour in a Glasgow library when he met a poet. It changed his life. Since 1990 when the City of Culture writer in residence Harvey Holton, invited him to tell a story which was immediately published, his name has become a familiar one in schools, teaching centres, prisons, young offenders' institutions and even in some Russian universities.

"After I told him the story which I invented there and then, he told me to write it down. I called it weetom and it was later published. I had never written a story and certainly never told one to anyone other than my children Naomi and Dominic." Michael says.

When he was invited some time later to tell a story to a group – and they laughed in all the right places – the adrenalin kicked in and Michael Kerins was hooked. The weetom of his first story became his trademark.

The library happened to be in the same block in Possilpark where Michael was brought up and where his father worked as a brush-maker and then as a shoe-maker. His dad was blind from birth and a storyteller par excellence.

He told Michael, the youngest of eight children and his siblings a story, in bed, every night. They listened to the classics among his 'talking books' for the blind and watched him, as he read in braille, the great stories like 'War and Peace'. "I remember it stood as high as I did," Michael recalls. Someone who listened to Michael recently says: "We laughed, we felt tears, we were there with him all along the way and it was one of the best journeys we've been on for a while, a journey of the imagination."

It explains why he is called in by professionals to meet children with problems, prisoners, young offenders and those in need therapeutic storytelling. He is much in demand now as a storyteller and workshop leader. This year Michael intends to return to Perm in the Urals which he first visited four years ago. He had never been to Russia before and he found it transforming. "It is a different planet." he says.

He has been back since then, accompanied by a nurse, to give lectures and workshops and has set up an international healthcare project which will benefit students of English at Perm University. This will eventually be broadened to enable all students to get advice on AIDS, sexual health and general well-being. Already the project has won two awards and the latest news is that it has won a major humanitarian award too. "The idea is that if we tell the students, they will pass it on," Michael says.

A young poet, Nicolai Naumov, who was Michael's interpreter, inspired the project and wrote some verses for him as a present. They were translated into 46 languages and dialects and published. Scottish laureate, Edwin Morgan, wrote the preface to the book, "Mother Tongue".

Languages such as Maori, Russian, Ethiopian and Vietnamese are included while the Hebrew version sits opposite the Arabic on the page and the Irish Gaelic opposite the Ulster Scots. It is a psalm to peace. So popular has the collection become that its financial success led to the setting up of the health project.

An important international Translation Prize has been inaugurated by Michael with the aim of encouraging students at these universities to widen their knowledge of contemporary English. The competitors will be judged by Russian students and University academics.

Another thrilling prospect which Michael could never have envisaged even three years ago is a book of his own short stories. Encouraged by listeners to "write them down" he is calling the collection "ten" and hopes it will be published later this year. The ten stories have been inspired by the people he has met and the conversations he has had. They are inspirational, provocative, incisive, disturbing and life-enhancing. Rather like Michael Kerins in fact.

Now we are ten – a thank you from the Storytelling Centre

It just seems like yesterday when the first 'Blethers' appeared. The idea was to provide a newsy chatboard for the storytelling network – sharing good ideas and experiences while flagging up some new initiatives or events.

Two volunteers, Ann Davies as editor and Colin Mackay, designer, took on the job and 'Blethers' grew and flourished like the bay tree. What a team they

have been. The Storytelling Centre congratulates Ann and Colin on their joint tenth birthday and looks forward to Many Happy Returns!

Wait Till You Hear This!

Focus on Falkirk for national get-together

Storytelling's National Development Day is set for Falkirk Town Hall on Saturday April 30th. It is open to all interested organisations and individuals and aims to inspire.

Keynote presentations will include storytelling in communities, stories and learning, creating emotional space for children, and life stories for older people. Some of the storytelling movement's leading innovators, Claire McNicol, Russell McLarty, Senga Munro, Colin Mackay, Judy Paterson and Ruth Kirkpatrick will lead the plenary sessions.

Round the presentations will be a focus on resources, story sharing, project surgeries, information about training opportunities, and there will be space for networking and chat.

Storytelling staff and office bearers will be on hand to welcome delegates and make sure that everyone gets the most out of their day.

The programme runs from 10.30 am to 4.30 pm and costs £15/£10 (concessions/network members) including catering.

For more details check the website www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk or phone for information.

Book in advance as soon as you can through the Storytelling Centre.

"It is a good time for storytelling," says SSC Director Donald Smith, "and this is a great opportunity to find out more about what is happening across Scotland and beyond."

The Swedes have our words for it

Heather Yule and I were invited to perform at the Gothenburg Book Fair by the Western Bothnia Theatre Company, who are developing a series of works using storytelling in the theatre in the north of the country. Apart from three daily story and music sessions we took part in a public seminar with the artistic director of the Storytelling Ensemble, two of the storytellers and an academic from the University of Umea.

The seminar, about story and identity, was held in Norrland the northern, least populated and most independent-minded area of Sweden. It was attended by nearly a hundred Book Fair visitors and was very open-minded and stimulating. Norrland, which only really 'opened up' in the last three

centuries, has strong similarities to Scots, even the local dialect "Bonska", bearing strong similarities to Scots. They are keen to develop more links through storytelling and to a lesser extent, music.

There seem to be possibilities of strengthening these ties with the help of the British Council. Judging audience reaction to the seminar, the storytelling, Heather's harp-playing which was particularly appreciated, and further presentations at the University, as well as the British Council Stand at the Fair, there certainly seems to be a strong, growing interest in Scottish story in Sweden. It can confidently be predicted that there is more to come. Watch this space.

Stuart McHardy

Mair Beuks! Scotland, Myth, Legend and Folklore has been released, in an expanded version called On the Trail of Scottish Myth and Legend, from Luath Press, and The School of the Moon: Scottish Cattle Raiding Traditions comes from publisher, Birlinn, worthy additions to Stuart's growing list.

En route to recovery

From Russia the good news – musician Alexei Kopylov, a member of the Wild Geese group, who did a concert tour in Scotland, is recovering well after the road accident he suffered in October 2004.

The tour, organised by Ewan McVicar, covered schools, churches and music societies and it was after a fine concert, hosted by the Scottish Storytelling Centre in Edinburgh, that bass singer Alexei was hit by a care and sustained severe head injuries.

Still with many months of rehabilitation to complete after months in hospital here, Alexei is now back at home in the Urals and Ewan and the new friends he made here are keeping in touch with progress.

By chance the Edinburgh concert was recorded by Pam Diamond of Moray and has been produced as a CD by Ewan's record label, Gallus.

New Netherbow rises

Room for more as project nears completion

The new Scottish Storytelling Centre is rising steadily from the ashes of the old Netherbow in Edinburgh's Royal Mile. Nearly £3.5m has been raised to make this possible and fund-raising is on its final lap of honour.

The current focus is on the George Mackay Brown Storytelling Library which will be the training and resources suite of the new Centre and small donations are sought for books, CDs, education, equipment and furniture.

There are also still opportunities to "Name-a-Seat" in the Storytelling Theatre with a personal dedication to a family member, a storyteller, or a cultural hero or all three together.

The new building will be handed over in 2005.

All donations should be made to "The Scottish Storytelling Centre" and sent to the director, Donald Smith, who has led the fund-raising effort and can provide information on all aspects of the project.

All Scotland responds as Tell a Story Day numbers soar

National Tell A Story Day in 2004 exceeded all expectations, with many new venues and organisations taking part and attendance figures surging upwards from 2003 totals.

Highlights included "Clyde Valley Ghost Stories" in Blackwood, South Lanarkshire, where the session obviously had an impact on playground time with the children making up stories themselves.

The Tron Theatre felt their "Food for Thought" event was something they hope to build on this year. A session for young people at the Login Internet Café in Barrhead, with Michael Kerins, was part of the East Renfrewshire Storytelling Festival. Co-ordinator Janice Weir, said it was great to see such a positive response from young people who had at first been dismissive about storytelling but it wasn't long before they were hooked.

The inclusiveness of National Tell A Story Day was summed up by Strathbrock Church in West Lothian: "We feel that this has marked the start of a new direction for our Church and hope to host other family events."

The 2005 National Tell A Story Day will be on Friday, October 28th. As 2005 marks the 250th anniversary of the birth of Hans Christian Andersen, why not use his fairy tales as a theme for a storytelling event in your local area?

(A paper-cut by the master storyteller – Hans Christian Andersen, born 200 years ago. The anniversary offers a challenge to those taking part in the 2005 National Tell A Story Day.)

If you would like to join in this annual celebration, and organise an event in your area, the Scottish Storytelling Centre will support you by sending specially designed posters, publicising your event on the website and arranging national press coverage. For more information please contact Jill on 0131 557 5724.

Northern duo share appointment

The Aberdeen Storytelling Fellowship has been taken up by two well-known north-east women as a jobshare.

Cathy Low of Ballater includes traditional travellers' tales and ancient myths in her wide-ranging repertoire and also teaches French, English and Drama.

Margot Henderson, from Findhorn also has a wide fund of stories, dating from her childhood and is a frequent teller of tales in galleries, museums and theatres.

Concert CD a tonic for Alexei

If you would like to support Russian Alexei Kopylov, a member of the Wild Geese group, who was injured while touring Scotland, you can do so by listening to him and his colleagues on a CD produced by Ewan McVicar.

It records the major concert held in Edinburgh in which they all took part. Proceeds will assist Alexei in his recovery. Enquiries can be made through the Storytelling Centre.

Stretch your skills and see Scotland as new programme starts up

Training has become the fun way to stretch skills and extend the many applications of storytelling in contemporary life. Workshops, courses, mentoring and development are all supported by the Storytelling Centre and facilitated by storytellers and projects across Scotland.

The Centre's Traditions and Skills programme runs in 2005, from April to November and has just been launched. It includes Beginner and Intermediate skills, Reminiscence with Older people, Rhymes and Raps, Scottish and Irish Traditions, Chapbooks and Ballads, Make Your Own Storytelling CD, Props for Storytelling, Storytelling in Education, Best Practice and much more. Training is undertaken by workers in education, social services and community projects; by volunteers; professional and emergent storytellers; by parents and carers and people with a general interest in storytelling traditions. Launching the 2005 Traditions and Skills programme, national co-ordinator, Joanna Bremner stresses that training events can be tailor-made for local circumstances and venues.

"The programme demonstrates themes and evolving interests across the network but is just a sampling of the possibilities." A special feature of this year's programme is the introduction of some weekend events in the Highlands.

From Friday to Sunday 20th-22nd May you could be at the Glendale Gathering in Skye, experiencing Irish and Scottish traditions in a prime home location.

On May 27th and 28th you can be in Ross and Cromarty celebrating Scottish Traveller culture. For full details check the Events page above, or request a programme from scottishstorytellingcentre@uk.uumail.com.

Celebration of lives spent at sea as sailors tell their story

Over 200 people took part in the first Gaelic storytelling festival for the Western Isles, organised by Proiseact nan Sgeulachd in Stornoway. From Barra, Uist, Berneray, Scalpay, Harris and all over Lewis, they came to share their stories of life at sea and the ports they had visited throughout the world.

The two-day gatherings of merchant seamen were filled with vivid and powerful stories from their sailing days and the ease with which they were so skilfully narrated was a sheer pleasure for all.

Doc Finlay Macleod, host for two of the sessions said of the Feis: "As the two days progressed one became aware of a huge reservoir of cultural life still embedded in an older generation, for whom there is now no social mechanism to give it expression.

With the demise of the household ceilidh, the bothan and public houses geared to conversation, the testimony of much of our culture's normal life experiences has faded into a seemingly irrelevance and silence.

However, the burnished speech and flashing wit, with peals of laughter echoing from the Town Hall, spoke of a lasting presence and appreciation," he said.

The Project continues to hold events throughout the islands with communities and schools and the most recent was an exhibition of work at An Lanntair Gallery. Storytellers from communities in Lewis and Harris had worked with children to produce images inspired by local story.

Merchant seamen from all over the Western Isles gather for two remarkable days in Stornoway as part of Proiseact nan Sgeulachd.

Tribute to Martyn Bennett

Everyone has been saddened by the tragic death of Martyn Bennett following a heroic fight against cancer. Our thoughts and prayers are with his mother Margaret, who has been a staunch supporter of the storytelling network since its inception and with his own immediate family.

The last track on Martyn's most recent, magnificent CD, "Grit", is called "Storyteller". He writes in the introduction: "This is my story about triumph in

the face of struggle. It is a story of the people and songs I grew up with and, most importantly it is their voices, traditions and the inspiration they have given to be passed on to the next generation."

As creator, musician and tradition bearer, Martyn Bennett has been, and is, a vital link in that living connection between past and present. We salute his achievement and mourn his passing.

D.S.

Borders couple win UK boost for woodlands project

Put stories and woodlands together and you spark off ideas and inspire the imagination. That's been the experience of environmental storytellers John and Noreen Hamilton, co-ordinators of the "Who Lives in the Woods" project.

Through it, local young people have become involved in a community woodland that had received scant attention and have developed schemes for their environment in the Scottish Borders, while the scheme itself is to be showcased as a model of good practice and it is hoped, inspire local authorities and other funders to take a look at story possibilities within their own surroundings.

"Throughout the process stories percolated around drawing, clay moulding, designing and building structures," John says. He and Noreen have also taken to the river with their Tweed Stories project.

This includes an integrated approach to environmental education and involves several subjects in the schools curriculum. Art work and creative writing help the children to explore and appreciate their surroundings and hear traditional Border tales which then inspire their own activity.

Schools already involved are Eddleston, Sprouston, Yetholm and Chirnside in the Borders and Tweedmouth and Glendale in Northumberland.

Feedback has been very encouraging and the children's art, poems and stories will be eligible for inclusion on the Scottish Borders Council's traditional arts website and possibly, a future publication. A Tweed exhibition could result as classes take part in their own follow-up activities.

"The stories are there, like the mortar or glue holding the structures together, but in a supporting role. The children were always allowed to change their ideas and create new characters."

The scheme was funded by "Curiosity and Imagination" a UK-wide initiative. It was the only Scottish project selected from all over Britain.

Traveller Event Takes to the 'Tin Road'

Looking forward to that time of year when Travelling People took to the road, a day celebrating their culture, crafts and way of life is planned for the Perrins Centre at Alness on Saturday, May 28th. Those taking part include Stanley Robertson, Jess Smith, Sheila Stewart, Essie Stewart, Elizabeth Stewart and Alec Williamson.

The event will coincide with the launch of a unique exhibition of images by the artist John Hodkinson. "The Tin Road" is inspired by stories John has heard from Scottish Travellers. More details or any other information on the Merry Dancers Storytelling Project are available from Bob Pegg (01997 421186).

This Highland area was the setting for an outstanding Tales of Martinmas, described by the local paper as "a feast to remember". The Norse theme for the sixth storytelling festival was clearly popular with excellent turnouts too in Tarbat, Ullapool and Strathpeffer. Jerker Fahlstrom, on his first trip to Scotland, was heartened by the response to his Scandinavian legends.

Another new voice, Cathy Mary MacMillan brought tales from her native Lewis and was a great hit with two of the Gaelic Medium Units in Easter Ross schools.

"Trowie men" Tom Muir and Lawrence Tulloch made a welcome return from Orkney and Shetland and this "cracking company" was well supported by ten local stalwarts.

Some in the audiences for storyground and ceilidh sessions came from as far as Banffshire, Sutherland and Wester Ross. During the week, including schools, around 2500 people in Ross-shire heard a storyteller.

The new Gaelic trailblazers Giving a modern boost to the Ceilidh scene

Martin MacIntyre reports on some exciting city developments

In communities as diverse as Lewis, Barra, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen, The Gaelic Ceilidh is currently enjoying vital development in various interesting shapes and formats. Importantly, this rooted milieu for social, arts and community expression is engaging with 21st century participants and audiences, giving it a contemporary feel and voice.

In the cities, a collaborative network of Gaelic Clubs is emerging with Edinburgh's Bothan (Bothy) trailblazing the initiative.

Established in October 2003, initially in the Meadow Bar, now the Waverley, Bothan's first Friday of the month has encouraged 170 people to abandon their favourite "EastEnders" characters and come and enjoy step-dancing,

singing storytelling, piping, poetry, prose readings and most recently a Gaelic Pub Quizy Disco (minus the dancing). An oidhche Latina (Latin night) is planned soon with members of Edinburgh's South American community.

The Aberdeen Gaelic Club has been similarly active since November 2003 and Ceol and Craic, the Glasgow version, has an exciting programme of events planned in association with An Lochran, including an Aonghas Dubh MacNeacail/Angus Peter Campbell double bill and a night with respected traditional piper and singer, Rona Lightfoot. The Glasgow Club meets in the Uisge-Beatha with dates advertised ahead rather than a fixed slot.

Through the Gaelic Storytelling and Clubs Forum these embryonic social gatherings complement and link with Proiseact nan Sgeulachd, run by Chrisella Ross at Proiseact nan Ealan. Over the last four years Chrisella has achieved so much in rural Gaelic speaking communities with adults, children and teenagers. Crucially the status of Gaelic storytelling in its native health has been greatly elevated.

Cumamaid oirnn!

Historic setting for school's heritage plan

Heritage in Performance was the theme of a nine-week programme at Lochnell Primary School when the MacDougall Collection joined forces with Scot An Sgeulaiche of Argyll. "It combines local history, museum artefacts and storytelling" says Scot and the aim is to inspire the sixteen P7 children to gather local tales from parents, neighbours and the traveller community. These would be then turned into a performance including drama, storytelling and music.

Scot's "Citizenship Skills" programme teaches storytelling techniques to the pupils and, he says, one of the stories he used was the classic Irish tale of Deirdre of the Sorrows, appropriately linked with the area near the school.

Looking forward to Blethers Number 11

The autumn edition of Blethers will bring news on events and tellers of tales, updates on the International Storytelling Festival, National Tell A Story Day and the latest information on the re-opening of the Netherbow Scottish Storytelling Centre in the Royal Mile, Edinburgh. If you have stories which would interest readers please write to Ann Davies at the Scottish Storytelling Centre, 43-45 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1SR.

A Waste Odyssey

More than 2,000 children cannot be wrong – they all see the funny side of an interactive show that's loud and colourful and confirms the ideas and principles of recycling and waste management.

"Waste Odyssey" is part of John and Noreen Hamilton's "Storiesplus" and is aimed at eight to twelve year olds. Already the Borders couple have presented it to over 2,000 children – some of them in the Highlands being bussed to a central venue. During the show, which includes a series of sketches, 33 children from the audience take starring roles. The show suits large audiences and John and Noreen can cope with 200 or more.

The Stupid Men, Bin the Can and Battle of the Bad Ideas are major features of the show which focuses on the wisdom of recycling, responsibility for rubbish and the "baddies", Kenny B Bothered and Max Naedifference. One showgoer in Skye had two words for it: "absolutely fabulous!".

How telling tales in school gain top marks for Storymakers' scheme

Storytelling is one of the subtlest arts yet one of the most powerful. More than any other, our lives depend on it and today the magic of it is reconnecting local culture and creativity through classrooms across Scotland. The Storymakers project, over the past five years, has played no small part in confirming the power of stories that lie not in print, but on the tongue. Here Beth Cross reports on some of the initiatives of a scheme which has attracted widespread acclaim.

It's been "festival time" for many Scottish councils who have grasped the value of storytelling as a firm part of the curriculum. In Glasgow, Dundee, Falkirk, Edinburgh and Renfrewshire local authorities have funded storytellers to work side by side with teachers in the classroom as they develop activities together. Many teachers report that the idea of the festival over a whole area has transformed the culture of the classroom, building trust and confidence.

In one West Lothian school, stories involved digital recording and inspired a leap of confidence among pupils who told their own stories behind a microphone.

Some schools have organised their own events to celebrate their pupils' skills and in Dundee, West Lothian and Falkirk this often takes the form of older children telling stories to younger classes. Generally, feedback shows that it is the in-school, in-class activity that the Project has lasting benefits.

The Scottish Arts Council grant has enabled storytellers to share and develop their experiences, through the organisational framework of the Project, with a wide range of groups and funders. The Scottish Book Trust, in developing "Live Literature Scotland", has encouraged applications for multiple sessions with writers and tellers – a model taken up in Glasgow by the cultural co-ordinator. The projects teachers and tellers developed through these sessions were then shared with the rest of the staff through "twilight" in-service sessions.

Other co-ordinators have also seen the value of Storymakers and in Renfrewshire this has taken many forms including: two storytelling festivals, a multi-media local history project, a curriculum guide for local use, contributions to Storymakers web workshop space and new festival model based entirely in schools. There has been a significant shift in many quarters from the expectation that storytelling is a “stand alone” performance, to the more integrated, interactive approach being widely taken up. In a variety of councils such as Fife, Edinburgh and West Dunbartonshire, storytelling is also contributing to multi-media projects.

Local heritage was given a boost in Port Glasgow after Danish artist Nina Saunders used storytelling to explore community customs. Sessions with Gerry Durkin led to sculpture designs which are being made at an Edinburgh foundry and displayed in a community garden in Port Glasgow.

The dynamism and initiatives for the schemes have remained with the tellers of the Scottish Storytelling Forum, bubbling over into work beyond the remit of the original target age group of 8-12 to include in North Lanarkshire, Glasgow and the Borders, work with younger children and families.

A key resource to staff and tellers has been the web-site which highlights ideas from the Western Isles to the Borders. A digital resource, inviting ideas and schemes, will ensure a continuity beyond the life of the project after September, while training systems and themed resources will be developed. The Village in Pollok, Glasgow has had training sessions for adults working with children – an idea that may be widely taken up, encouraging critical and creative thinking.

There are many signs that a major critical re-think on the curriculum is underway. The storytellers of Scotland are well placed to engage with the new opportunities that will arise.

The Centre acknowledges the support given by the Scottish Arts Council, the City of Edinburgh Council and the Church of Scotland Board of National Mission.