

BLETHERS AUTUMN 2005

International visitors for autumn festival

Telling Tales of the world a capital idea

As the leaves turn golden, and the evenings lengthen by the fire, the autumn storytelling season begins.

The Scottish International Storytelling Festival 2005 takes the theme 'Folk and Fairy Tales of the World'. Running from Friday 21st to 30th October there is a cornucopia of events for children and adults in a host of venues in and around Edinburgh. You can hear the best stories and storytellers, be part of a ceilidh atmosphere, experience the skills and tell your own stories.

What, though, is the magical and enduring appeal of fairy tales, particularly those rooted in folk memories? According to Tolkien it is their power to transform life by imagination, their realisation of dreams and desires. Perhaps above all, it is their realisation of dreams and desires. Perhaps above all, it is their essential moments of release, escape, reconciliation and so of joy. Life is not and never was an easy passage, but our need for happy endings is keener than ever. Scots, Gaelic and Traveller traditions are rich in fairy tales, but alongside these you will be able to explore Middle Eastern stories and the fairy tale legacy of Hans Christian Andersen.

The first weekend of the Festival, 21st to 23rd October, features Egyptian storyteller Chirine Al Ansary, Shai Schwartz from Israel and Palestinian musician George Samaan. From Arabian Nights to Jewish folktale this promises to be a fabulous experience, building on previous Middle Eastern exchanges.

Hans Christian Andersen, whose bicentenary we celebrate this year, is a master of the literary fairytale. What happens when a complex artist harnesses folk tale magic to his own, often tragic, experience? In Andersen's case it goes further because his folk tales have become part of new folk traditions. What, also, is the role of illustrators in these transformations?

Storytelling, of course, is the perfect antidote to theory. So gear up now for National Tell A Story Day on Friday 28th October when you can organise your own local event, and concoct your own magic recipe – folk and fairy, traditional and contemporary, young and old.

Publicity support and national listings are available from the Scottish Storytelling Centre. Stories are for everyone so why not get your community, school or family involved?

The Festival's second weekend, 28th to 30th October, majors on Scottish traditions and on the Feast of Samhain or All Hallows Eve. Highland and Traveller storytellers feature, with the urban tale-tellers of Glasgow, Hallowe'en was originally the Celtic New Year, a time of merrymaking and inner renewal. As we say at the Scottish Storytelling Festival, why spoil a good party?

Celtic Stories prove a winner at the Waldorf

Claire and Fergus McNicol report on the flourishing relationship between Scottish storytellers and their Swedish cousins.

After a glorious week of summer evening ceilidhs at Emerson College in the company of three Swedish teachers, we were delighted to receive an invitation from Annica Lundgren to visit the Waldorf school in Uppsala. The main focus of our work was with 16 to 18 year olds. We found them immensely responsive to traditional stories about Finn McCool, Jack and the Seal people. They particularly enjoyed listening to our accents, making story sticks, movement games and participative stories for younger children. We worked closely with Oskar Ungersted, the English teacher, who was inspired to see some of the quieter pupils taking more risks in expressing themselves. We forged a very fruitful creative partnership with Emma Belung, the school teacher and a gifted fiddler and singer.

The week culminated in our telling a story, accompanied by Emma at school assembly. We told the "Coming of Bride", an ancient Celtic tale, and Emma sang in a primal style which is used to call in the animals from the pastures. It was spine-tingling! We also visited Nina Nasheim in Stavanger, Norway, and the exchange continues. Nina was at the Book Festival in Edinburgh in August and we have been invited back to Uppsala next year.

Help for Nation at Risk

Now they are our friends too

The Cofan nation is one of the oldest intact cultures in the Americas but they have suffered the impact of inappropriate development on their lands and lost more than 90 per cent of their territories due to the pressures of world development, particularly the impact of the oil industry. Their numbers have been drastically reduced.

Friends of the Earth in Scotland secured finance for the Cofan to set up a youth association and some of their representatives have been here finding out how young people get involved in policy making processes. The group toured widely, in city centres, in remote parts of the Highlands, in industrial areas, presented petitions to the G8 leaders – and met some of the Scotland's storytellers when they called in at the city refugee centre.

"There was a brilliant turn out of Scottish and Irish storytellers," says Teresa Martinez of Friends of the Earth, "lots of participation too from some of the refugees. It was a very nice beginning to a trip, rich in cultural exchange, through the medium of stories. We warmly appreciate their involvement and thank the storytellers who came along." The Friends will continue to support the youth organisation and provide training and they hope to set up networks of other indigenous groups, including women, as well as promoting Cofan craft.

John Knox House is Open Again

John Knox House re-opened after its eighteen-month facelift with a series of special events, supported by the Heritage Lottery fund. "Inside Stories", a series of lectures and tours, covered the history of the city, the Royal Mile and the historic house, once the home of James Mosman, goldsmith to Mary, Queen of Scots.

One of Scotland's greatest national treasures and associated with some of the most dramatic events in Scottish history, it stands near the original site of the medieval gateway to the city and the lectures, by Dr Donald Smith, director of the Netherbow, formed a pilot for new storytelling and learning resources for schools and adult education.

The results of the restoration and conservation processes at the House have attracted new visitors, tourists and local enthusiasts and historians, who have all been excited by the discoveries which have been made on the Netherbow site.

A very early learner

Beth Cross, whose development role at the Storytelling Centre recently ended, ensured that her new baby, Benjamin, got an early foretaste of the Forum when he attended the Development Day at Falkirk. His brother, Ade, is already a veteran of storytelling events. Good wishes to Beth and her family for the future. In September Beth resumed her work at the University of Edinburgh

Midsummer songs and stories a sensation

Overheard at the Midsummer Magic Storyfair: "Imagine a butterfly has landed on your cheek." (to a face painting client).

"I think I would like to be a pink giraffe!" (to a face painter).

"You know Katie Morag is quite an old lady now!" (Mairi Hedderwick, her creator, to children celebrating 21 years of the stories at the family fun afternoon organised by the Storytelling Centre and the Scottish Book Trust.

Future brighter for Alexei

Good news from the Urals where musician Alexei Kopylov continues to improve following the accident he suffered while on tour in Scotland. Ewan McVicar, who has kept in constant touch with him in Perm says: "Thanks to a wonder drug the severe infections plaguing Alexei's leg seem at last to have been conquered."

The many friends Alexei made during his stay will be glad that he is recovering from his brain injuries and, through text messages from his hospital bed, was involved with the travel arrangements for Ewan and Christine Kydd, who were in St Petersburg and Perm in August with Chorus Quartet, the group of which Alexei is a member.

Prescription for Better Health

An American academic, who sees storytelling as a method of healing, has told members of the Storytelling Forum in Scotland that it should be made a core element of medical training.

Professor Joseph Sobol, an authority on storytelling with therapeutic intent, said that at his university in Tennessee storytellers now have an input into the multi-disciplinary curriculum.

Children victimised by war, orphans in Romania and patients with cancer have all benefitted from hearing stories, he says, because of their restorative quality. The doctor-patient relationship is fraught by a lack of communication – but stories are a healing art.

Gifts for Library Speak Volumes on Oral Traditions

Among some wonderful gifts that have been received for the Storytelling Centre library is a superb two volume collection of American Folktales from the Library of Congress.

The books are beautifully selected and edited from the American Folklife Center at the Library by Carl Lindahl. Carl will be known to many storytellers here as a regular visitor to the School of Scottish and Celtic Studies and to our own Guid Crack Club. This year he will give the Bruford Memorial Lecture at the International Storytelling Festival. What he reveals is a treasure house of oral recordings and transcriptions, many of which have Scottish links and collectors like Alan Lomax also played an important role here in Scotland where Ewan McVicar has recently re-edited some of the original Lomax recordings.

As for the storytellers, they range from the Hicks and Harmons through Woody Guthrie, to stories being shaped in New York after September 11th.

As Lindahl states, the voices belong "to some of nation's most important and accomplished, yet least recognised individuals". Sounds familiar!

Folklife Center, the publisher, and of course Carl, deserve our gratitude and praise.

We have also received copies of Lorn MacIntyre's Tobermory Days and the new Tobermory Tales, published by Argyll. The first book is about how storytelling kept going, even as traditional lifestyles in Mull disappeared. The focus is Archie MacLean, the bank manager who keeps language and community alive through his network of contacts and knowledge, not least the local telephone exchange.

The Days are a fine collection of stories and an affectionate tribute to MacIntyre's own father who was the bank manager.

The Tales, newly out, develops the theme but in a darker and more disturbing way.

The loss of society and community leaves fractured lives. The stories here are accomplished literary short stories but more distant from the oral networking of the oral tradition. As we go to press, two titles are fresh from the ever fertile storytelling brain of Stuart McHardy, School of the Moon published by Birlinn collects tales around cattle droving and raiding. It is a fine addition to previous themed volumes on music, smuggling and whisky.

From Luath Press comes Stuart's Tales of the Picts. But surely, says you, we don't know why any of their stories, just their stones! Oral traditions, of course, are harder to put down than that, as these Pictish tales triumphantly demonstrate.

Donald Smith

Ever widening circles

The "Claik an' Clype Storytelling Circle" has been set up in Inverness by Lilian Ross and Greg Dawson Allen, both members of the SSC.

The aims are to create a gathering of storytellers and listeners and share in the oral tradition of storytelling. Poems, street rhymes, skipping songs and even jokes are welcome. The Circle is eager to attract anyone who enjoys a good story and ballad singers are also welcome. For more details contact Greg's email on greg_dawson_allen@hotmail.com or by telephone on 01463 233729.

A winning formula in Fife

Following success last year, at the Fife Adult Learners' Awards, of the first "Storylines" project run by the Libraries and Adult Basic Education Fife, a second group has won the 2005 Scottish Arts Council Award, presented during a National Adult Learners' Week ceremony in Glasgow, Seven ABE students, including teenagers, an elderly widower, young mums and mature women moved from listening to stories, playing story games, storymapping and writing, over eight weekly sessions, to produce a booklet of individual stories. Storyteller Margaret Tollic is thrilled at their success. "I feel privileged to have had the chance to work with such a great bunch of folk," she says. Scott Kernaghan, Isobel Duff, Lynda Murray and Marina McNeil, pictured above, had a great evening, plus the stunning surprise of their award. "Their faces were a picture – I think you can tell that from their photo," Margaret says. Students Ann and Paul Wotherspoon were unable to attend and sadly, John Young passed away before the SAC Award was made.

Bi-centenary of Hans Christian Andersen

Why H.C.A.? It's his anniversary and we're celebrating

The 2005 National Tell A Story Day is even more important than usual because of the birth of the great storyteller, Hans Christian Andersen.

Many tellers of tales will be wanting to re-visit his archive in planning events for Friday, October 28th. Will the Snow Queen appear, or the Princess and the Pea and what about that Ugly Duckling? Whatever you choose it will be an opportunity to recall his stories and perhaps give them a modern twist.

Tell A Story Day stalwarts know it is a very special time. Always held in the autumn when spirits are abroad, the event brightens dark days and inspires old and new storytellers everywhere.

Can 7,000 people be wrong? That's how many took part last year – the biggest number so far – when, from Monifieth to Mull, folk joined in the celebrations of the art of oral storytelling.

The Centre can help anyone wishing to promote an event which can be held at any venue – libraries, schools, even garden sheds. You could throw a party and dress up. Pyjama parties are not unusual. For help and information contact the Storytelling Centre at 43-45 High Street Edinburgh EH1 1SR, tel: 0131 557 5724.

Scots pay tribute in song and story

The close links between Scotland and Andersen, the great storyteller have been recalled in many events – at the Edinburgh Book Festival, and in an exhibition at the Danish Cultural Institute – but a major celebration continues through the autumn until January 29 2006.

"The Greatest Fairy Tale – the Amazing Life and Times of Hans Christian Andersen", at the City Art Centre (October 1st to January 29th 2006) will form the climax of the Scottish events and is expected to create widespread cultural and educational support and interest.

National Tell A Story Day, promoted by the Scottish Storytelling Centre, takes Hans Christian Andersen as its theme, on October 28th, while choral and organ music events are being staged at the Usher Hall in Edinburgh and November.

For further information: www.edinburgh.gov.uk/Andersen and www.dancult.demon.co.uk.

Fitting legacy for teller of tales

One hundred and thirty years after his death, Hans Christian Andersen still speaks to readers and storytellers across the world through his fairy tales.

His stories, travel sketches, plays and novels have thrilled readers of all ages and today he is one of the most translated and popular authors, so it was a brilliant vision which decreed that his bicentenary should mark the launch of a plan to beat illiteracy among one billion in the world.

The celebration is the biggest Danish cultural project ever undertaken and the setting up the Bikuben Foundation will ensure that his legacy will be the improvement of life for children and young people across the world, giving them the opportunity to read and write.

As part of the campaign, ambassadors have been appointed to represent the Foundation's aims. Scotland's are: Dame Muriel Spark the distinguished author, Bill Boyd, the actor and Baroness Helena Kennedy, the human rights advocate and leading lawyer.

Born in the slums of Odense, his father a shoemaker and his mother an uneducated washerwoman who opened up the world of folk lore to him, Hans Christian Andersen composed his own fairy tales and arranged puppet shows before he was fourteen.

When he was 17 one of the managers at the Danish Royal Theatre where he worked, provided a grant to enter a grammar school and he followed this up with university in Copenhagen.

A prolific writer and always travelling, his big breakthrough came in 1835 with his autobiographical book, "The Improvisatore" – but his fame rests on his "Fairy Tales and Stories".

In a world-wide celebration to mark the 200th anniversary of his birth, every section of Danish life is involved in promoting the events, of which Queen

Margrethe II is not only the patron but has contributed some of her own set designs and costumes which have been used in performances of Andersen's works. These will be on view at the Danish Cultural Assembly at 3 Doune Terrace, Edinburgh from September 16 to October 28th. (0131 225 7178) for information.)

Hans Christian Andersen's connection with Scotland dates back to the summer of 1847 when he travelled here intending to meet Sir Walter Scott.

He was entertained in London by Disraeli and Dickens before moving on to Edinburgh where he lodged at Lixmount House in Newhaven. Here he was no doubt reminded of the fishing communities in Denmark so familiar to him.

Soon he was a sought-after dinner guest among the fashionable residents of the New Town – but he never met Scott. He travelled to the Trossachs and Loch Lomond and sailed on the Firth of Forth. Queen Victoria invited him to join her at Loch Laggan but he refused, concerned he would not be grand enough.

His Scottish visit, which, he said "floats before me like a fantasy of joy and sunshine" is now commemorated by a plaque at his lodgings., 73, East Trinity Road, Edinburgh, which was unveiled in July as part of the bicentenary celebrations.

The city's floral clock featured some of his most well-known characters as a further tribute.

Hans Andersen produced delightful paper cuts – another talent. This depiction of swans and trees and the windmill with children are typical.

A flood of ideas await 'The Ark'

"Where is the Ark I commanded you to build?" " Well you see, Lord, the pitch factory is on work-to-rule, and one of the sub-contractors has gone bankrupt."

"But Noah, we agreed. You signed up to my project." "Yes, Lord, I'll get the family together to embark." "Where are they all?" "Well it's this pop group Ham has set up, Glastonbury, T-in-the-Park..." "Oh, Noah."

Yes, the Scottish Storytelling Centre in Edinburgh's High Street, is taking a bit longer to complete than originally planned, but it is beginning to look very impressive with all its new spaces in reception, theatre and Storytelling Court at the site of the historic Netherbow. The prediction is for the contractors to finish towards the end of the year. It will take ten to twelve weeks to test the building, move in, and set up all the new resources. So an opening in March 2006 is likely. Meantime, fundraising continues apace for the resources

library and the Storytelling Court. Thank you to all those who helped with the Midsummer Magic Storyfair which raised £400.

Over fifty seats in the storytelling theatre now have a named dedication. There is still just time this autumn to add a name and commemoration to the rich story of these dedications. Each seat costs £275. And of course, they are all inflatable.

Donald Smith, with thanks to Anne Guthrie

How storytelling is transforming Scottish life

A record number of people took part in the Development Day at Falkirk in April. Among them was Blethers editor, Ann Davies, who found the experience to be full of surprises – and at times, profoundly moving.

In the area which sends more people to jail than anywhere else in Scotland, the story people have been working miracles. Where children and elderly folk are in fear of the gangsters who are also their neighbours, sacred places are being created. Where vulnerable toddlers, at risk in society, tell their own stories, the culture of the classroom and the nursery is transformed and where adults with reading difficulties can now say, "Look! We've written a book," it is storytellers who have inspired a sea-change.

The day was full of good news from every part of Scotland. "Wait Till You Hear This" was the theme and more than a hundred of us listened. Many of us were astounded by the breadth of what is happening. Supporters old and new brought insights, exchanged ideas and networked in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

To hear the speakers, representing so many aspects of storytelling throughout the land, was to realise that Scotland is in the grip of something truly transforming, and that the inspiration and motivation for it springs from the Storytelling Centre and its encouragement of individuals and networks.

The range of activities, in communities, schools, elderly people's centres, after school groups, clubs, libraries, prisons, caring and charity-groups, in woodlands, forests, as therapy and even at funerals, is phenomenal. Storytelling has been adapted to every need you can think of. Today's tellers of tales are in good company. Word about what is going on here has spread to Europe, Scandinavia and the Middle East where there are now active links.

It became clear to me, in reflecting on the day, that in creating parklands and sacred spots, involving children at high risk and parents with little prospects and few expectations, in welcoming the asylum seeker and the stranger, in giving hope to the hopeless, people among us are doing exceptional and extraordinary things.

Thousands across Scotland are affected by this developing phenomenon and the opening of the Centre next year will bring demands and challenges.