

BLETHERS AUTUMN 2004

Around the World in Ten Days!

Festival is focus for international visitors

Voyages and Migrations are explored in this year's International Storytelling Festival. Storytellers from Scotland and around the world will join together to make Edinburgh and the Lothians the place to be in October. Guests from Africa, the Caribbean and Asia will be involved in stories, music and song from the Viking and Norse sagas, tales from Orkney and Shetland and traditional Scottish Traveller tales.

The main programme, from Friday October 22nd to Sunday October 31st will be at St Cecilia's Hall in the Cowgate and there will be workshops, talks and tours for adults and plenty of events for children at a range of atmospheric venues. These include Edinburgh Castle, Dobbie's Butterfly World, Edinburgh Film house and the City Libraries of the capital.

Details of this truly international event are in a full programme, available from the Scottish Storytelling Centre at 43-45 High Street, Edinburgh, telephone 0131 557 5724 or email your request on scottishstorytellingcentre@uk.uuimail.com

Make your Day – tell a story

Stories are busting out all over Scotland and on Friday October 29th, anyone who ever wanted to tell a tale gets a chance on this very special fourth annual National Tell A Story Day.

Last year, over 4, 500 people took part hosting events, in venues all over the country and coming together to enjoy the ancient art of oral storytelling. In the Abbey on Iona and on an ice rink in Pitlochry tellers got together in 2003 to celebrate with yarns, sagas and shaggy dog stories.

If you want to join in this year the Storytelling Centre can help with support through publicity, posters and listings on the website.

The StoryMakers project has shown there is huge support for stories across Scotland with thousands being reached through training, events and new resources. You could be a part of it all on October 29th.

Wild Geese Winging Their Way to Warm Welcome

A musical tour this autumn by the Chorus Quartet of male voices will further strengthen the links between Scotland and the city of Perm in the Urals, the city where Boris Pasternak wrote "Dr Zhivago".

The visit comes about through a remarkable collaboration between the Russian group and Scottish storyteller Ewan McVicar during 2002 when poems by Edwin Morgan, Pasternak and Pushkin were set to traditional Scottish airs, arranged by the Quartet and jointly performed in a world premiere in Perm, as part of the Festival of Scottish-Russian Culture.

Since then the Quartet members and Ewan have been developing new arrangements over the Internet. Some feature lyrics drawn from the writings of the world-renowned 19th century Scottish archaeologist and geographer, Sir Roderick Impey Murchison. His 1840s exploration of the Urals led him to name a whole age of the earth after the Oblast (province) of Perm – around 240-258 years ago.

Ewan now plans to explore, in story the 16th century shipwreck of the Russian ambassador off Fraserburgh and Jacobite Scots plotting in St Petersburg. The group has adopted the title of "Wild Geese" for its Scottish tour because many of the geese born in Russia in summer come to winter in Scotland. "Also, it recalls the Wild Geese Jacobite Soldiers who found new careers in Russia after the 1745 Rising and because the Scots say goose and the Russians say gus."

In September and October they will visit schools to exchange artworks by Russian and Scottish schoolchildren. Evening concerts will combine classical and folk pieces and include the new compositions and arrangements."

"This group comes from the gateway to Siberia" says Ewan, "where the snow lies for six months, but their style is warmly engaging and their range of material cheers and warms the heart".

Discovery reveals Centre's link with medieval Edinburgh

Construction work on the new £3.5 million Scottish Storytelling Centre on the Royal Mile in Edinburgh has revealed the doors and windows of the medieval home that was once a neighbour to John Knox's House.

The remains uncovered by workmen survived the collapse, in 1837, of the rest of the original building, latterly known as Lord Balmerino's House. It had been neglected following Balmerino's execution in 1746 as a Jacobite 'rebel'.

Before that the Netherbow tenement had been part of a special development of four houses in the 1470s to provide a narrow, protected passageway for Edinburgh's principal gateway, the Netherbow Port. John Knox House is the only one of the four to have survived completely.

Centre director Donald Smith is astonished at what has come to light. "We are delighted to have found these medieval features. They prove that the Netherbow has been a vital hub in the city's life for centuries and we hope to incorporate some of these survivals in the new building".

John Knox House will re-open in the spring of 2005 and the new Centre will be fully operational in late autumn of next year. Designed by Malcolm Fraser Architects, the Centre has the financial support of the Church of Scotland, the Scottish Arts Council, Scottish Enterprise Edinburgh and Lothian and a host of charitable donors.

Skye Box Reveals A Lifetime of Stories

Linda Williamson found more than she bargained for when the dreich winter weather drove her to find solace on Skye with Christine Martin and her husband, both music publishers.

The day before her arrival a magical box had been delivered to them containing scripts and stories preserved over forty years by writer and broadcaster Rhona Rauszer now aged 94 and a resident at An Arcasaid, Broadford.

As a radio dramatist for BBC Scottish Home Service and later BBC Radio Scotland, Rhona had written prolifically, but when her sight began to fail she turned to the tape recorder.

Many attempts in the 1990s to publish her collected works failed, despite the support of Dr John McInnes of the University of Edinburgh and publishing directors on Skye and elsewhere.

"Rhona's whole life was in this box – original illustrations, lots of photographs of her as a film and theatre actress. The stories were true to life, yet steeped in folklore beliefs, the customs and traditions of the Gaels. Could I help with the publication? It was a great challenge" says Linda, herself a storyteller and archivist of song and stories.

When she met Rhona it was love at first sight and the editing of her stories began last year. But because of the difficulties of the past, Linda eventually decided to complete the book herself, including maps, glossary, pronunciation and photographs in addition the written text.

The labour of love was still to be a victim of circumstance. Linda's agent, the well-loved Giles Gordon who thought the collection superb, tragically died at this home before anything could proceed.

The two women waited, sharing quiet walks along the shore of Broadford Bay. "But as God closes one door he surely opens another" says Linda. When Hugh Andrew of Birlinn publishing saw the design he fell in love with it and Rhona was contracted for publication, at last, of 'Consider an Island: Eilean Sgitheanach'. Rhona married a Polish war veteran. She converted to Catholicism and became a recluse after Kozik's death in 1968, living and writing alone until she became disabled. "It is a fantastic privilege to work with her", says Linda. And there is more thrilling news for everyone who has taken an interest. "We are now ready with two more books which have been accepted by the publisher."

"Consider an Island: An t-Eilean Sgitheanach" is published by Polygon at £8.99.

A Tribute to a Young Storyteller Who Died in June 2004

Mark Cummings (aged eight) was one of our most enthusiastic storytellers. With his mother, Margaret Ann (an adult helper) and two brothers, David and Ian, Mark was involved all through the clubs and Festival performances at Royston Road in Glasgow's East End. The three months of the project were among the best and storytellers John and Noreen Hamilton tell of how Mark knew every character and could fill in when anyone was absent.

Only two weeks after the June Festival the worst thing imaginable happened. Mark had been out playing around the high flats in Royston but didn't return home. He was later found dead and a man was arrested and charged with his murder. Mark's family wanted his funeral service to be open to all and a celebration of his life. With projected photos, happy songs and thoughts from Sister Eileen and our storytellers, the service, which I conducted, as the local Church of Scotland minister, was held in the largest public building, St Roch's Roman Catholic Church.

Our thoughts are very much with Mark's family and the whole community. On a Saturday in August everyone was involved in a Fun Day, organised by local people to try to give some joy to local families. It was in tribute to Mark and we hope that the DVD of the Project will also celebrate his memory in some small way.

Rev Russell McLarty

Agnes's rainbow cloak will clothe you in confidence

The Talking Trees Storytellers have been telling stories at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh for the last two years and will now have an even higher profile thanks to Agnes Johnston, a second year student on Edinburgh Telford College's HND course in Public Art.

For her second year placement, Agnes was keen to create a work of art that visitors to the Botanic Garden could enjoy and so the idea was born to produce a storytelling cloak. It is decorated with the spreading branches of a tree and scattered leaves in rainbow colours – reminders of the sun and the rain without which there would be no trees and no stories. It has an array of pockets in the lining for your flute, your green dog, or any other essential props to storytelling. The cloak is on display in the Botanic Garden's Exhibition Hall and will be seen in action, worn by storytellers at the regular monthly sessions.

If you would like your chance to wear the cloak and to tell stories, the Talking Trees are looking for more volunteers. The free family storytelling sessions are held once a month, along with a variety of other events. It is a great way to build up your confidence if you are new to the art. For more details, please contact Emily Haigh, email at education@rbge.org.uk

On a Winning Streak

Pupils projects create a light in the North

A local tale, brought to life by pupils at Tain Royal Academy, was one of nine winners of the 2004 engage Scotland Visual Arts Education Awards, run in association with the Scottish Arts Council. The awards were presented by culture minister Frank McAveety in a ceremony at Mount Stuart on the Isle of Bute. The Gizzen Briggs Animation Project formed part of the Highland Council's Merry Dancers Storytelling Project. Project director Bob Pegg brought first year classes in the English and Art departments, together with storyteller Martin Wattsman and animator, Dave Smith, both based in Tain.

Learning to re-tell a story and then how to transfer original artwork into Flash animation, was a great experience for teachers and students.

Along with their voices, the children's self-portraits are now immortalised as the witch sisters, Angus the messenger and a colourful, buzzing, boxful of workaholic fairies. The Academy's fiddle group, also known as Gizzen Briggs, provided music for soundtrack.

In another project, at Tarradale Primary School, Muir of Ord, Bob worked with P5 pupils to collect local stories, record them and then with the help of artist, Inge Smith, produce their own illustrated books. Andrew Mackintosh, Janet McInnes and Duncan Williamson contributed stories in the course of the term.

A Ghost Walk in Cromarty was a challenge – how to scare folk witless on a clear July evening? Bob and Andrew proved equal to the task, leading a crowd of almost 100, young and old, round the cobbled paths and shadowy graveyards of Hugh Miller's village. Also very enjoyable was the Brahan Seer Walk and picnic from Strathpeffer to the iron age fort of Knockfarrel with along the way, the Seer's prophecies, re-told by Andrew, plus tales, tunes and riddles from Bob. August brought the creative combination of storytelling and puppet-making to Strathpeffer's Community Centre and Spa Gardens, in a week-long project for families called Star Makers – tales from the constellations, with Julian Atterton and Jane Robinson from North Yorkshire.

Blethers fans plans wise move on CD

In the National Museum of Scotland on Chambers Street, Edinburgh are a number of Lewis Chessmen. I have always been fascinated by these. I came across their story twelve year ago. That story I have now learned and put on my first CD, "Any Time Tales" forty-one minutes of seven stories and three short, unaccompanied songs. "Sea Gods", my Lewis chess piece story, is the only Scottish one I have committed to this CD, although I do tell Scottish stories whenever I can.

Anybody interested in finding out more can write or ring me. The CD is available at £8.50 postage £1.

Des Charnley, 2 Lake View Villas, Bowness-on-Windemere, Cumbria LA23 3BP
Tel 01539 443252 **Sadly, Des passed away in 2006.**

Well Loved Storytellers Will Live On Through 'Name a Seat' Scheme

Members of the Scottish Storytelling Network and enthusiastic supporters are leading the way in fund-raising for seats in the theatre of the new Scottish Storytelling Centre. Almost half of the seats have now been "named" in honour or in memory of a founding pioneer, a storyteller, or someone who has been an important "storyteller" in one's own life.

The dedication have themselves been so interesting that a booklet is planned, which will give some background information on the people behind each commemoration. The individual plaques on the seats will be a moving tribute to

the personal power of story and to all the people who have made the storytelling renaissance and the new Centre possible.

In addition, these donations are inspiring others to give, because they demonstrate our own support and commitment. The Community Programme of Barclays Bank has agreed to give £20,000 towards the educational resources of the new Centre, Orkney Islands Council is donating an Orkney Chair which will sit beneath the George Mackay Brown Memorial window and other acts of kindness and goodwill continue to be shown.

“We have about another £50,000 to go now out of a once impossible £3.5 million,” says Donald Smith, who is leading the fund-raising efforts. “Thank you everyone but please keep going so that we can do the last lap in style!”.

The cost of each seat is £275. Donations for individuals seats with dedications are warmly welcomed, but there are also some dedications to founding pioneers that need part funding. Contact: Donald Smith at the Scottish Storytelling Centre or email on donald@scottishstorytellingcentre.com.

“More Please” Appeal From First-Time Authors in Fife

A literacy project in Fife has used storytellers’ gifts to improve reading ability and computer skills through creative writing and better communication.

The result of the courses, in Dunfermline and Kirkcaldy, initiated by the council’s libraries and Adult Basic Education scheme, had led to the publication of “Storylines”, two collections of stories written by folk who would have considered themselves poor readers and lacking in confidence.

Margaret Tollick, who worked with the ABE group tutor, Helen Johnston Morris, in Dunfermline, says being on the project was a pleasure and privilege because every week of the course she could see progress in each student as they worked towards the publication of their stories and the gradual use of the library’s computers.

Susan Butts, the librarian who organised the project, and colleagues were anxious to set up in Kirkcaldy too, Judy Paterson ran the sessions here.

For many, she says, reading and writing was an onerous task, but stories flowed from the students – a major achievement for some of the more diffident.

All involved with “Storylines” feel it was a great success and should be continued. Margaret, like Judy, a member of the Scottish Storytelling Forum, says she was only one of the professional team involved but her personal evaluation is that it

would be a pity if the planning, effort and the knowledge gained, proved to be a one-off experiment. "The sense of achievement was palpable from everyone as they realised that given time, encouragement and some technical help, they had produced, from within the group, a booklet of stories which they as individuals had written. I'm delighted that some of them are continuing with making up their own stories and working to get them onto computer."

Memorabilia from world war two were among the items introduced by Judy, who used anecdotal, local history and personal stories with her group in Kirkcaldy. Two of the men had an interest in the war and a third had lived in Germany afterwards. Gradually all realised they had stories of their own to tell and were eager to produce the book which was launched at Kirkcaldy Library. "They all enjoyed it so much they wanted a 'follow up' course and some members of the group are now working on a local history publication" she says.

Both Judy and Margaret valued the organisation and support of all involved from the libraries and ABE during the sessions.

ABE staff felt from their viewpoint the project achieved all its aims – in literacy skills, ICT, social and communication ability and in the use of the library. While there had been some reluctance to visit it, all were surprised by what they discovered it had to offer them.

Copies of "Storylines" have been presented to the students and placed in local libraries for general use.

'Love Like Salt' Project Draws Generations Together

Schoolchildren and elderly people joined hands and hearts in a unique storytelling and drama project, with professional actors, that has set new standards for artistic co-operation across the generations in Glasgow. When "Love Like Salt" hit the stage of the Citizens' Theatre Circle Studio it was the climax of weeks of preparatory storytelling, work with video, film, improvisation and art – all reflecting the experiences and lives of Primary 6 and 7 classes and groups of elderly folk in Pollok and Royston.

Tag Theatre Company was planning to perform 'King Lear' this winter and when a Tag team of performers, director and education officer considered the folk-tale, "Love Like Salt", Shakespeare's inspiration for his great play of love, power and jealousy, they forged ahead with the communities project.

Angela Knowles, who has wide experience in storytelling, education and theatre quickly became involved and initially the team, with director Emily Gray, worked

separately with each age group, exploring the characters and dilemmas of the story which recalls a time when salt could be more precious than gold.

Then, both groups worked together, bringing out their own ideas of tolerance, negotiation and changes in family relationships. Video artists joined in to capture precious moments on camera which not only formed a record, but gave all those taking part a 'virtual presence' in the final storytelling on stage.

"The substance of the filmed moments shown in the performance were all created by the elders and children themselves" says Angela, who was thrilled to be associated with all the groups.

"I just wish it could have had a longer run than the three days so more could have seen it. "But we hope this is just the beginning and this sort of thing will continue.

The teachers involved were very enthusiastic and there was excellent co-operation from the schools. It was a stunning effort as many had never been in a theatre before or involved in any kind of project. It was very complex." Almost ninety people were involved including Forum members Rachel Smillie of The Village at Pollok and Russell McLarty, Royston.

Donald Smith, who recommended the folk-tale to Tag says: "It was very moving to see the elders and the children exchanging their thoughts and, when the old man playing the king went forward to hug the young prince, I was fit to greet." For Emily Gray it was a farewell to Tag – and a final work which will never be forgotten by all who took part in it. She hopes it will resonate in the future and inspire an interest in Shakespeare's telling of 'Love Like Salt'.

'Storytelling Wall' Gets Backing from Barclays

Barclays Community Programme is making a £20,000 donation towards the free educational facilities at the new Scottish Storytelling Centre and, in particular, to the 'storytelling wall' which will introduce schools and community groups to a new world of telling stories.

The Centre is the hub of a network of educational and community activities across Scotland which involve over 200,000 people annually and the Barclays support has been warmly welcomed by Dr Donald Smith, "Social investment from the private sector is a vital part of what we are trying to achieve alongside our public partnerships with the Scottish Arts Council Lottery, the Church of Scotland, Edinburgh City Council and Scottish Enterprise Edinburgh and Lothian" he said. Stella McRae, community manager for Barclays, said "We are delighted that we have been able to make this donation for the storytelling wall. This is a great

opportunity for us to help make a real and lasting difference to the local community.”

Viking Invasion

Tales at Martinmas, the annual storytelling festival of the north, runs from November 8th to 14th 2004, in schools and community venues. This year features a Viking theme, as befits the history of Ross and Cromarty and guests invited so far to join local festival stalwarts include Tom Muir, Orkney, Lawrence Tulloch, Shetland and Jerker Hallstrom, Sweden.

Scots quartet go adventuring in Iceland

Borragnes in Iceland was the exciting destination, in June, for storytellers Bob Pegg, Heather Yule, Tom Muir and Lawrence Tulloch. Bob and Heather flew direct from Glasgow but Tom and Lawrence were able to take a ferry from home in Shetland – the ‘Norróna’ from Lerwick to Seydisfjordur, calling at Torshaven on the way.

The great adventure was made possible by the hard work of organiser Asthildur Magnúsdóttir. She was determined that storytelling would be part of the Borragnes event, now and in the future.

The whole event was hugely enjoyable in a stunning country, among people like Asta, her husband, Johannes and Jóna Torfadóttir whose hospitality was boundless.

Lawrence Tulloch

Tales on the Tongue

Where do storytellers get their stories? Well, from many sources, but one of the best is from another storyteller. That is why the storytelling network has come together to produce a superb anthology of living, oral tales told now in Scotland. Each story has been contributed by a storyteller and the tales cover all age ranges and a wide variety of language styles and traditions. The aim is to reflect the extraordinary vigour of storytelling in Scotland today and the strength of the traditions by which it is nurtured.

Storytellers are invited to use “Tales on the Tongue” for oral telling with acknowledgement of the source. A number of the stories are recommended for use in storytelling workshops. “Tales on the Tongue” has been edited for the Scottish Storytelling Centre by Bea Ferguson and the production has been financially supported by the Scottish Arts Council.

Also appearing as a new publication this autumn is "Storytelling Workshops: A Support Pack for Workshop Leaders".

This invaluable guide to styles and approaches has been edited by Ewan McVicar with a wealth of input from experienced workshop leaders including David Campbell, Judy Paterson, Bob Pegg, Senga Munro, Bea Ferguson, John Hamilton, Claire Mulholland, Ruth Kirkpatrick and Margaret Tollick.

"Storytelling Workshops" range from work with children, through training of teachers and librarians to work with young people and adult literacy groups. As well as the guidance on structures, skills and methods, there are photocopiable handouts.

The book is designed for storytellers and other experienced workshop leaders. Though less widely applicable than "Tales on the Tongue", which will suit all beginners, aspirant and developing tellers, "Storytelling Workshops" is a rare distillation of the wisdom and experience of the storytelling network – generously shared.

Again, the Scottish Storytelling Centre is grateful to the Scottish Arts Council for supporting this network initiative.

Copies of both of these resources are available from the Scottish Storytelling Centre, 43-45 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1SR:

Tales on the Tongue - £7.95 plus £2 postage and packing

Storytelling Workshops: A Support Pack for Workshop Leaders - £15 plus £2 postage and packing

It's a Small World in Glasgow's Village

Cultures and customs combine in international project

Storytelling became the international language between asylum seekers and the folk of Greater Pollok in Glasgow when they set off together on a "stories from around the world" project.

Exchanging their stories and experiences presented a wonderful opportunity to share cultural traditions, improve language and establish mutual trust. A permanent reminder, in the form of a book of stories called "Buffalo Horns", a which has been widely publicised, will help to cement relationships and encourage similar activities.

The project was created at The Village, a remarkable community storytelling centre at St James (Pollok) parish church, which is managed by Rachel Smillie. "During the course of the project the story collector Liam Stewart and assistant, Anne Gardner, held regular meetings with asylum seekers where stories were shared and collected." says Rachel. "These meetings often took the form of language classes while the college language class tutors were also very supportive of the project."

Stories were shared at a ceilidh for asylum seekers and refugee families living in the South Nitshill and Kennishead areas of Greater Pollok, as well as dancing and food. One asylum seeker told stories at Pollok Library for children from St Robert's Primary and a refugee attended a Fair Trade event, with Liam, to tell stories there.

A launch event, funded by the Community Action Team, included a dramatic presentation of one of the stories in the book, which has been welcomed as evidence of the valuing of the wealth of cultures in the area.

Another positive outcome of the project has been the positive media coverage. One of the major aims had been the reduction of suspicion and fear between communities while forming new awareness beyond stereotypes.

Rachel feels the process of collecting individual stories has had a therapeutic value for those asylum seekers sharing their stories and who now want to take part in further, similar projects.

"Storytelling events have enabled local organisations and residents to hear stories and meet asylum seekers in an atmosphere that is fun and social," says Rachel. "This is a good way to break down cultural barriers and educate." The book is circulated free to all schools in the Greater Pollok area and to all organisations, including churches. All schools in Greater Glasgow will have one free copy. Remaining books will be sold at £4.99 and any cash raised will be used for a second printing, or passed to the funding bodies, the Greater Pollok Social Inclusion Partnership, through Scottish Executive Integration Resources Fund and the Glasgow City Council Community Action Team.

The Village is a storytelling centre for people of all ages, providing a setting for a variety of programmes from reminiscence for older people and their carers, to storytelling and related activities for young people and children.

A Song for Scotland

This autumn brings a special book occasion for Storytelling Centre Director, Donald Smith. Luath Press will publish a selection of his longer poems written

between 1979 and 2004. The title, "A Long Stride Shortens the Road", reflects political and personal journeys during that period. The title is the refrain of a tribute poem to Hamish Henderson.

The collection, which was launched in Edinburgh on October 8th, the night before the opening of the new Scottish Parliament, includes 'A Song for Scotland' which, sung to the tune of "Highland Cathedral", has been tipped as a national anthem for Scotland.

Land of the Mountain, islands and the sea
Highland and Lowland, that gives life to me,
Mother of justice and humanity,
Be our last refuge, stronghold of the free
Be our last refuge stronghold of the free
Scotland, to you our minds and spirits soar.
Lift our eyes homeward and our sight restore
Guide all earth's restless children safe ashore
Shine light to humankind for evermore
Shine light to humankind for evermore

Land of the mountain, islands and the sea
Highland and Lowland, that gives life to me,
Source of the strength and love always to be
From start to journey's end faithful to thee
From start to journey's end faithful to thee.

© Donald Smith 2003

Festivals Bear Fruit – And More Forecast

This spring, Children's Telling Festivals popped up across Scotland.

Falkirk, Glasgow, Renfrewshire and Edinburgh hosted festivals in which children brought stories, shared them and went away with even more stories they were eager to explore. Enthusiasm, inspiration, trust, a heightened sense of their own and others' ability – these were written across the faces of participating children and teachers.

The one striking observation, made by the festival organisers and professional tellers, is just how effectively they inspired and convinced teachers and children. Festivals have been adapted to suit the needs and resources of councils and have been supported by training and in-school teller visits.

Whatever level of skill or interest children came with, they left, not only feeling their contribution was appreciated, but with more ideas for exploring stories and more confidence to do so.

Ruth Kirkpatrick reflected on the Children First Festival in the Gilmerton area of Edinburgh: "There's a kind of 'magic glue' effect to storytelling – through listening together, a class of children can come together as a group, wondering about the story's development and enjoying each other's suggestions."

Festivals in Glasgow and Falkirk allowed participants to express themselves visually. In Glasgow the children's pictures were used as back-drops to telling. In Falkirk children contributed to a story in progress, projected on to the wall in the central gathering place.

All festivals have encouraged teachers and children to make storytelling an integral part of school culture. Organisers and participants feel this is something that should become a tradition and keep on growing.

The excitement is catching. More festivals are planned for 2005 in West Lothian, Inverclyde, Dundee, and more widely across Edinburgh, as well as in the pioneering councils' areas. Of the many enthusiastic responses children have given to the festivals, one, by Ian in Edinburgh, may best encapsulate what the festivals are about: "I liked the storytelling festival. It helped me gain courage" he said.

New Tales Bound for 'top of the pops'

Scotland's storytellers are inspiring ever more books and CDs. Although they can never replace the magic of live telling, they are an important way of making stories better known.

From Skye, the stories of George MacPherson are featured on a new CD, "The Swans of the Loch", produced by Kyloe Records. This is a fine complement to George's Luath book, "Highland Myths and Legends" which is currently being reprinted.

Stuart McHardy has two new story collections out with Birlinn Publishing. They are "MacPherson's Rant" and other tales of the Scottish fiddle and "The Silver Chanter" and other pipers' tales. These are well produced collections, full of useful tales to tell.

Please let Blethers know about other publications which will interest readers.
Royston Road Youngsters Thrill The Crowds With Their Own Stories

From February to June there was an explosion of storytelling in Glasgow's East End. Eighty youngsters joined five storytelling clubs for 16 weeks of fun and fantasy and resident storytellers, John and Noreen Hamilton, guided them to build their own characters and stories, working with puppets, mask-making and collage. Adult 'helpers' were vital members of the "team".

The climax was a three-day festival, where the youngsters shared their stories with more than 800 people in two community evening events and performances in all five local schools.

It was so important to get the right storytellers and we struck gold with John and Noreen. The five clubs each had their own dynamic and fun. It was only in the final weeks that each fixed on a story to share and these included romance, science fiction and a folktale.

The festival performances involved all the children, who had only a few practice sessions. With adult support, they told their wonderful stories with great spirit. Guest storytellers Robert Howat and Gerry Durkin shared the stage.

All the children will receive a DVD or VHS tape, certificate and project calendar as mementoes of the Project as well as the special t-shirt.

A budget of £19,500 was supported from five sources – Scottish Arts Council, Glasgow City Council and Leisure, a local Police fund, a local International Festival Fund and a Sense over Sectarianism Award.

For eight years I have enjoyed telling stories in local schools and running "Chit Chat", a weekly after-school storytelling club. Through this I had the idea for something which would get more children involved in storytelling and help build up the small communities which straggle along Royston Road in Glasgow's East End.

Our funding dictated that the stories should include issues such as sectarianism, racism and bullying – this all under the theme of 'life stories'.

It would be great to make this an annual residency and Festival but there is a huge challenge to find continuing funding. There is no doubt that this project is very much about 'social inclusion', where young people find a voice and tell their own stories.

Russell McLarty

A Tale of Triumph and Hope

On a storytelling trip in Alaska, I was presented with an absorbing and moving book, written by a Jewish-American storyteller. It is a small hard-back, attractively presented and every chapter begins with a story from around the world – Poland, Finland, the Middle East, India and China.

They tend to be fables, incorporating a truth about life, sometimes satisfying, sometimes puzzling. They are quite short, pithy and entertaining.

What makes the book so unusual is that the stories are incorporated into another story – that of Joel ben Izzy, who travelled the world telling stories until an operation for thyroid cancer robbed him of his voice.

What seemed like a disaster, affecting not only his career but his relationship with his wife and children, ended up being something quite different. Paradoxically, through his inability to tell his stories the storyteller gradually became aware of their true meaning, and the ending is one of hope. I thoroughly recommend this book. Besides being an engrossing read it inspires us to seek for truth and cope with loss. "The Beggar King and Secret of Happiness" is available from Amazon.co.uk or can be ordered from Joel ban Izzy's website: www.storypage.com.

Julia Donaldson

Millie is New Arts Champion For Older Folk

The Scottish Storytelling Centre has appointed an arts champion for older people.

Millie Gray, born and brought up in Leith, has been a pioneer in storytelling and drama with older people and now she plans to highlight in arts provision in Scotland.

Recent findings by the Social and Economic Research Council have demonstrated that almost a fifth of people over 75 have lost their zest for living while most over 65s report problems from chronic illness, isolation and loneliness.

"A year ago" says Millie Gray. " We established the Life Stories Group within the Scottish storytelling network devoted to engaging with older people, including those in residential care. We have met a wave of appreciation and demand for arts activities among this age group."

The appointment has been made with the support of the Scottish Arts Council and the aim is to encourage the Centre to pilot new ways of reaching older people and supporting active arts participation. Life Stories will begin work this autumn under Millie's leadership.

Director of the Centre, Donald Smith, welcomes the new move and says the older generation has a huge and positive contribution to make to the art of storytelling and to the wider life of a healthy society.

Sheila and Duncan In The Headlines

The achievements of well-loved Scottish storytellers, Sheila Stewart and Duncan Williamson, are highlighted in the summer edition of "Travellers' Times", the national magazine devoted to helping Gypsies and Travellers to share information and contacts with supportive organisations.

Their storytelling and publishing successes are featured in the magazine which is published in Hereford and is part of the Rural Media Company.

Day To Remember at Glespin

Glespin residents' plan to put the village on the map as "storytelling capital of the world" took a step forward when guest storytellers from Estonia accepted an invitation to the "end of summer party" in August.

Piret Paar and Catlin Jaago were the guests of the Storytelling Group at Glespin, a small village between Douglas and Muirkirk on the Edinburgh to Ayr Road. The visual arts, puppet and costume making were all part of the day's activities, funded by Leader +.

Let's Try Storytelling For Peace

It is early days yet, but John Wheeler in Galloway has been talking with Scottish storytellers and those in an international peace foundation, with its European HQ in the South West, about how to develop ways of running a "storytelling for peace" project.

His idea is to open communications between children, young people, communities, faith groups, folklorists and anyone interested in promoting international and inter-cultural understanding. He hopes that the rich wealth of stories we must have, about finding – and even following – pathways to peace would inspire us to enrich our homes, schools and communities. "There must be good stories of how opposing forces negotiated their differences and built their peace." John says.

Advice, offers of assistance, good stories and any expressions of interest will be welcome. Contact John on 01644 450683 or email on johnw@lauristonhall.demon.co.uk.

Storytelling Retreat A Success For Stanley and GAS Supporters

Jackie Ross describes the first residential event to be organised by Grampian Association of Storytellers.

We knew we would be in for a unique experience at Monymusk when Stanley Robertson suggesting making our first ever such event a storytelling retreat. No-one was disappointed. The theme, "Catch the Vision", soon became clear, for I understood more fully than ever before exactly what he means when he talks about the "heart" in storytelling and "doing it in the Traveller way".

This was a magical experience, a true sitting at the feet of a master and, as one attending said: "The weekend made me even more convinced of the relevance and need to explain why traditions and storyrealm should continue."

This was not a case of sitting back however. Stanley made it clear that it was not a holiday but that you have to work hard on a retreat. We were up at the crack of dawn and out for a walk on the Old Drove Road at Lumphanan, the site of his favourite Traveller camp when he was young. Despite the rain and wind this proved a highlight of the weekend.

Judging by the comments it certainly seemed that people welcomed the chance to walk in the footsteps of the tradition bearers. It made the stories more alive. I could go on at length about other aspects of the weekend – Stanley's individual "surgeries", which were a fantastic support for the individual, the fresh food, meeting new people, the atmosphere, the flock of swans on the bank of the River Don.

But I will leave it to another whose comment on Stanley was "Tremendous, unique, stimulating, enthralling....I can't think of enough positive adjectives" A further weekend was planned at once and was due to take place at Angus House, Edzell in September. Details of forthcoming events from Jackie Ross on 013398 86039 or email on gas_story@hotmail.com.

The international circle, created through Blethers, was completed when Gill Moloney met Poroto Ngawea in New Zealand. Readers have been following the story of how Gill, whose family were originally from Orkney, was presented with an original drawing of a dancing trow by artist Bryce Wilson when she was tracing her roots in the island. The picture had been used in "Blethers", which also reported how Edinburgh storyteller Marion Kenny, had visited Poroto and his

family when she was researching Maori stories. Poroto helped greatly with her studies and now that Gill has met him the link was forged. Tom Muir of Orkney Museum, who first alerted us to the story, is delighted that the magazine can bring people together across the world.

Your Next Blethers

The tenth edition of Blethers will appear in Spring 2005, heralding a new era for the Scottish Storytelling Centre and its historic neighbour, John Knox House, a focus of Edinburgh city life for centuries.

If you have a story which would interest readers, please contact the editor, Ann Davies, at the Scottish Storytelling Centre, 43-45 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1SR.