

# Blethers

Issue 20 Spring 2010

## Connecting with Stories

New Training and Development Programme



Now in a new, simplified six-monthly format, the Storytelling Centre's March-September 2010 Training and Development Programme offers a range of workshops for beginners, intermediate and experienced or professional storytellers, including those using storytelling in their work, community or home.

The Traditions and Skills strand offers people of all experience levels the chance to develop, hone and sharpen their storytelling skills. There are rich pickings here for the beginner storyteller, whether your interest lies in traditional tales and tunes, or working with early years or primary aged children.

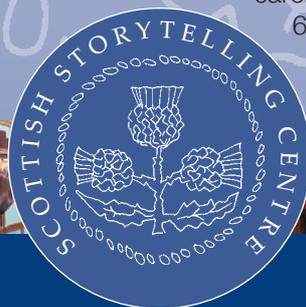
For advanced learners, David Campbell's workshop on 'Context and Self-Presentation' invites us to reflect on our use of body language, dress and voice; while 'Storytelling and Comedy: Entertainment?' led by comedian and writer Siân Bevan delves into the relationship between the two mediums, with riveting results!

Whole Person Learning again offers a selection of development events for professionals working in education and community or family learning, with a May CPD in-service day on 'Creative Storytelling in the Curriculum'. Also, don't miss an exciting new twilight session exploring the use of Storyboxes for stimulating storymaking, storytelling, and talking and listening skills.

The Health and Wellbeing theme continues this year, with a half day April workshop on storytelling and reminiscence with older people, as part of the Life Stories group's Spring/Summer 2010 project. This is closely followed by Scotland's first International Symposium for Storytelling as a Healing Art, taking place from 13 to 19 June at the Kelvin Conference Centre in Glasgow. Another date for the diary is the East and West Story Festival: Glendale Gathering 2010, with guests this year from as far as Singapore. This is a chance to hear and tell stories, share experiences, establish connections, and participate in workshops across a range of cultural and educational themes, all set in Glendale on the beautiful Isle of Skye. Not to be missed!

Last but certainly not least, we are delighted to be continuing our collaboration once again with Newbattle Abbey College, providing a skill development programme accredited by the Scottish Qualifications Authority. The 'Contemporary Oral Storytelling: Project' unit in May is followed by a 'Practical Skills' unit in October.

Visit [www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk](http://www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk) for updates. For more information on the Centre's training programme, or on options for tailor-made training in your area, please contact Caroline Budge on [caroline@scottishstorytellingcentre.com](mailto:caroline@scottishstorytellingcentre.com) or 0131 652 3272.



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## Directory Welcome!

Here we introduce you to new members of the Scottish Storytelling Centre's national directory of storytellers, and give a flavour of their style and interests. A warm welcome to Elaine, Nia, Donald, Alan and Alasdair!

### Donald Nelson Glasgow

Donald likes to tell stories from all over the world. His stories usually have a humorous slant and he collects and adapts stories from different cultures. Donald writes his own stories, poems and songs. He also sings and plays the guitar. He works with SEN schools and Looked After and Accommodated Children but also enjoys working with adults, particularly in reminiscence.



Donald Nelson

### Elaine Garner Bogue, Kirkcudbrightshire

Elaine's stories vary from original and contemporary to traditional, from personal anecdote to mythology and fantasy. She enjoys stories that 'work' on many layers, and working interactively with groups like families or special interest groups. She has used stories for many years in her work as an actress, performing arts teacher and drama therapist.



Nia Jones-Green

### Nia Jones-Green Glasgow

Nia loves to share all kinds of stories from folk, fairy tales, myths and legends to historical and contemporary tales originating from Scotland and beyond. She often uses music and props, encouraging the audience to participate so they become a part of the story. She has over ten years' teaching experience and is enthusiastic about how storytelling can support and enhance the Curriculum.

### Alan Steel Glasgow

Alan tells local stories from Renfrewshire including some which he has collected from neglected sources, and during oral history projects which he has run. He also tells Scottish folk tales, including stories from pagan and Christian traditions, trickster stories, Selkie stories, and village and workplace tales. Alan was Storyteller in Residence at Crookston Castle in Glasgow.

### Alasdair Taylor Edinburgh

Alasdair's main stock of stories comes from the Celtic traditions, particularly the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and, where appropriate, he tells these in Scottish Gaelic. Alasdair is also making ancient Celtic stories from the Mabinogion, and the Ulster and Fenian Cycles, more widely heard among contemporary audiences, that they may take their place in contemporary culture. In addition, he tells stories from all over the world, with emphasis on themes ranging from environmental education to peace and conflict issues.



Alasdair Taylor

## Scottish Storytelling Network Opens its Doors

Join us for an informal and inspiring day of workshop tasters, talks and discussions, and drop-in storytelling sessions at the Storytelling Centre in September.

This is a wonderful networking and social opportunity for storytellers and anyone interested in using storytelling within their work or community – meet some of Scotland's finest storytellers and tradition bearers, and delve into the varied and wide-reaching work of the Scottish Storytelling Centre and Network.

Find out more about current projects in education, health and wellbeing, heritage and environment and share your own ideas and aspirations for storytelling in your area.

Sun 5 September, 12-5pm

### Scottish Storytelling Network Open Day

Scottish Storytelling Centre,  
43-45 High Street  
£10 including buffet lunch and refreshments (book in advance) or just drop-in for free.

Bookings: 0131 556 9579

Enquiries: 0131 652 3272 or  
caroline@scottishstorytellingcentre.com

If you're not already a Network member, why not sign up and receive discounts on all training events at the Scottish Storytelling Centre, plus monthly updates about the Centre's national projects, events and activities.

For just £12 (£10 conc.) per month you also get an invitation to our members-only Network development events, and are eligible for storyteller shadowing and mentoring opportunities.

For membership enquiries, please contact our Outreach team on 0131 652 3272 or caroline@scottishstorytellingcentre.com.



## Cape Clear Island Storytelling Festival

Back in 2002 I had this very simple idea – to sail through the settings of Scottish maritime stories. I started to make it more complicated till I realised the simplicity of the concept was essential – there would be enough variables with wind and tide and chance meetings.



Ian in flight on Cape Clear

First I shared the stories with the people of Scotland, sometimes by visits to schools, sometimes by performances at festivals like the Scottish International Storytelling Festival or by visiting the School of Scottish Studies.

But storytelling is after all word of mouth and one Liz Weir invited me first to Northern Ireland and then, as part of the Cape Clear Island Storytelling Festival committee, to that island which looks out to the Fastnet lighthouse. You see the sweep of a mighty beam when the sun falls. This was to be the 15th such festival, founded by Chuck and Nell Kruger.

The formula is that there are four main international guest tellers and a musician who can also yarn for Ireland. The programme is quite full and alternates between solo and duo performances where there is the chance to develop a strong theme, and Ceilidh sessions where the guests alternate. You need a substantial repertoire and you need to listen well to what's gone before.

There are also open-mic sessions (without a microphone) and a superb team of MCs. Liz worked with Pat Speight and Jack Lynch to keep the humour and shifting moods flowing. For me it was an honour to speak up for the Hebrides in this cosmopolitan environment.

We were all well advised by Pat, amongst the opening banter in the southbound car, that this was the place to trust the audience. If you felt like telling a demanding story, an emotional one or a risqué one, this was the place where a committed audience would travel with you.

Sound advice. There's few places I've felt such warmth in the September chill. As guests we became a team and then a group of friends. I'd met Mats Rehnman in Edinburgh last year. Now I got a feel of his wide range and intellectual soundness emerging in a natural voice. Lyn Ford spoke in many voices. She represents so many strands of North American cultural background and her stories of the animal kingdom, or of the behaviour of young humans just learning about life, were timeless. Clare Murphy just became her stories. These could be large-scale Irish legends or contemporary takes on fairy tales but there could be strong drama one minute and stand-up humour the next. She's a dancer on stage but again she's lost in the story – there's nothing that seems self conscious.

And a young-at-heart veteran Jimmy Crowley opened his patent box to let guitar or mandolin accompany songs and structured blethers. Now if I were to get a chance to sail round Ireland...

### Ian Stephen



Clare Murphy

## The Talking Trees

The Talking Trees are a small but dynamic group of volunteer storytellers who give their time and energy to share stories with visitors to the Royal Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh every third Sunday of the month. The current Talking Trees members are Bill and Georgia Abernethy, Ashley Davies, Ian Edwards, Lindsey Gibb, Stephanie Ledger, Colin Mackay, Mary Anne Robinson, Lea Taylor, Alette Willis, Liz Wilson, and Emily Wood.



Liz Wilson in the John Hope Gateway

Having started telling stories on a regular basis in the Forest Room near the Glasshouses, the Talking Trees have now set up camp in the beautiful Patrick Geddes Room in the new John Hope Gateway building at the West Gate entrance to the Garden, which opened on 7 October 2009.

As well as their regular monthly storytelling sessions, the Talking Trees also entertain visitors to the Botanic on special occasions. During last autumn's Scottish International Storytelling Festival, Georgia Abernethy, Bill Abernethy and Alette Willis all drew on Native American and First Nations stories passed on to them whilst spending time in North America.

The Talking Trees group occasionally take on new members. If you share a love of nature and would like to volunteer your time to be part of this friendly group please contact Amy McDonald on [amcdonald@rbge.org.uk](mailto:amcdonald@rbge.org.uk).

To keep up to date with Talking Trees sessions and other events taking place in the Garden please sign up to our monthly newsletter at [www.rbge.org.uk/enews](http://www.rbge.org.uk/enews).



## A Slovenian Journey

I had met Katarina Juvancic in Orkney in 2004 when she was a lecturer at our Science Festival, giving a talk on the Scottish ballad 'Tam Lin'.

We actually met at a 'Homecoming' concert given by Cree First Nation dancers where Joseph Naytowhow was singing and drumming. We became good friends and she persuaded the organisers of a storytelling festival in her native Slovenia to invite me to their festival in March 2009.

I was based around the capital, Ljubljana, which is a beautiful small city in the central European style, but was given the opportunity to travel quite a bit and see this very beautiful country; from the Adriatic coast, through plains filled with grapevines, cypress trees and walled medieval towns to the majestic Alps (and the scariest mountain road that I've ever been on, and I've been to Applecross!).

I realised that my reputation was on the line, as the festival couldn't afford to waste money on an unsuccessful performance. I also knew that any future invites to foreign storytellers hung on what I did, as they had taken a big gamble in inviting me.



Tom with Irena, Anja and Alenka in Ljubljana

I did an interview with 'Radio Student', which promotes folktales and storytelling, and another with Slovenia's national TV station. The very glamorous presenter asked me, "How can you hold people's attention for an hour or more?" I looked at her with a very serious expression and said, "That's a trade secret, and if I told you I'd have to kill you." Kat gave me a telling off for that, but it turned out that it was the only part of the interview that they used!

Anja Stefan, the storyteller, writer and festival organiser, had said that she wanted to broaden her understanding of storytelling and festivals, so I suggested that she visit the Scottish International

Storytelling Festival, and so she did, accompanied by Alenka and Špela who help out with the festival, as well as being involved with 'Radio Student'. They enjoyed the festival and took away with them many ideas and the experience that comes from seeing other storytellers. This has led to a unity between our two nations, as Anja has asked David Campbell (who kindly gave her a room during her visit) to attend this year's festival. There might be other connections later in the year, if funding comes through, and more cooperation in the future.

**Tom Muir**

## Festival Fever Strikes

Now almost a distant but fond memory, the 2009 Scottish International Storytelling Festival ran from **Friday 23 October to Sunday 1 November**, and for the Year of Homecoming this year's event focused on the rich theme of 'Homelands', exploring stories and histories of belonging, identity, migration and exploration.

Thanks to generous support from the Scottish Government's Expo Fund, the Festival featured an impressive line-up of the finest Scottish storytellers, alongside leading artists and tradition bearers from the indigenous cultures of North America, Australia, New Zealand and the Caribbean. The interaction of these different styles and traditions, all in the hands of world class storytelling artists, made this Festival one of the most artistically memorable to date.



Sean Choolburra at the 2009 Storytelling Festival

Alongside a meaty programme of events at the Storytelling Centre, we worked with local partners including Royal Botanic Gardens, the National Museum of Scotland, Filmhouse, the Museum of Edinburgh and the Scottish Seabird Centre to create a colourful Edinburgh and Lothians line-up. A parallel 10-day schools and communities outreach programme also ran from Tuesday 27 October to Friday 6 November across Edinburgh and the Lothians, and the ever-popular national Tell a

Story Day event took place on Friday 30 October.

A new addition to this year's celebrations was the 'Festival on Tour' strand, building on successful 2008 events in Glasgow and Argyll & Bute. This saw an international guest go to each of the regional groups and clubs in Tayside, Dumfries & Galloway, Argyll and Bute, Aberdeenshire, Glasgow and the Highlands – a truly memorable experience for storytellers and audiences alike.

After a quick breath of air, we're back into Festival mode and an exciting programme is already beginning to take shape for this autumn, running from **Friday 22 to Sunday 31 October**. Under our **Eastern Routes** theme, we'll be exploring and celebrating Scotland's historical and cultural links with India, China and Japan. Visit [www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk](http://www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk) for Festival updates.



## Stories are the Greatest Medicine

Retiring after a thirty-year career as an associate occupational therapist, part-time actor and children's entertainer, I was beginning to be just a little bit bored with so little to do. Then I had the good fortune to meet the wonderful John Fee, and he suggested I come along to the Guid Crack Club.

I imagined a group of 'auld buddies' sitting round an open fire, swapping tales and puffing on clay pipes! How wrong I was – the place was packed with a vibrant crowd of all ages and backgrounds, with not a clay pipe in sight.

Within a few weeks I was to find myself standing in at short notice at a school for children with behavioural problems. I must have done OK, as I was then given the job of storytelling to a group of young male offenders who were in the process of readjusting to life in the community – hostile at first but very soon not only listening to stories but relating their own, often hair-raising, tales.

My next job was in a stroke ward and, in the few weeks I worked there, I was impressed by the improvement in some, not all, of the patients. The highlight for me came on the day a nurse came to one of the rooms in which the sessions were held, to tell us that the laughter of the group could be heard halfway up the corridor, and that this was a rarely heard sound in stroke wards. This was to be followed by a few weeks in a secure psychiatric unit – working with Millie Gray and two nurses we on occasion outnumbered the patients two to one. The last session we had, the patients gave us a little party. I'm not given to crying, but came close to it as we said goodbye to our pals.

Between this medical work, I found myself storytelling all over the place in old folks clubs and centres, and at all times I found people have a great need to communicate and laugh. Speaking of laughter, a wonderful experience for me came about when working with a group of adults with learning difficulties. As some had taken part in a pantomime the previous year, they

once more wished to 'smell the greasepaint'. It was decided that we would tackle Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood*. The group adapted the various characters to how they saw them. Learning lines was not possible for most, but dressing up and improvisation was, with great results. Dylan Thomas was a man of great humour – I like to think that of the many times he has looked down on the reenactment of his great work, this performance gave him the most pleasure, as it certainly did the group, who travelled by train, some for the first time ever, to appear in the Netherbow Theatre in Edinburgh, the festival city. They will have something to remember for the rest of their lives.

During my work as an associate occupational therapist, in-service training involved the visiting of prisons, as a large percentage of prisoners are mentally ill. I had been in Carstairs, Barlinnie, Cornton Vale, but never in Saughton Prison in my hometown. This was to change when I was invited to tell stories to a 'special group' of prisoners, about fifty in all, at Saughton.

It was hard to tell who was most apprehensive, the prisoners, "This old guy is going to tell us about Red Riding Hood, or worse still, this is a new form of capital punishment, they are going to bore us to death!" I was thinking, "What if there is a riot and I am taken hostage?" Neither was the case – it was a great afternoon and should I ever find myself in prison for not paying my taxes, I know I would get a good welcome from the men I met that afternoon.

Another unusual job was to come in the form of telling stories on a one-to-one basis in a local hospital.



*Under Milk Wood cast in rehearsals*

A real challenge this was. People lying in bed in hospital can feel vulnerable and suspicious of a stranger appearing at the foot of their bed. "Is he a Jehovah's witness? Or worse still, an undertaker? Or perhaps a double glazing salesman?"

After I introduced myself it was plain sailing, and I was to be told so many interesting stories. I had to ration myself to twenty minutes a bed – some folk would have spoken all day. There was a man about to be discharged who was a Native American Indian. His wife who arrived to take him home told me that the word 'squaw' to her was an insult. Her name was 'Gentle Cloud', her husband's name was 'He Who Leads'. I was honoured to be shown the very colourful photographs of their traditional wedding in Mexico.

The next bed had a local man, who as a young man had been a bookies runner. Before the law was changed, it was illegal to take bets anywhere other than the racetrack. Bookies runners would stand at street corners and have bets given to them, and upon spotting a policeman they ran! Great old guy. So many stories to hear, if only one had the time to hear them all.

Next job? I'll just have to wait and see. So thank you to John Fee for opening the door for me to a worthwhile job. Never came across any clay pipe smokers though!

**Jack Martin**



## Scotland's a Blether

Another new addition to Blethers, this section provides news from the many wonderful storytelling clubs, groups and champions across Scotland. Many thanks to everyone who contributed this time. We look forward to an update in the autumn edition!

**BagaTelle** is an up-and-coming group that meets in various locations around **Midlothian**. We meet on the first Monday of the month, 8-10pm, although the venue does tend to change given that it is held in one of the group members houses (space permitting). Our numbers have been increasing since we started in November 2009 and we are now up to an acceptable seven.

Essentially we are a development group, and we are open and welcoming to all storytellers at whatever stage they are at, and that includes just coming along to see what it's all about. Bring us a story, poem or song or just simply listen and enjoy – there's something for everyone.

Plans for the new year? For starters, we will be holding our own Development Day workshop in tandem with South East Fife group and Blether Tay-gither in February. Watch this space for more to come!

To find out more please contact Lea Taylor on 0131 660 5783 or [lea-andy@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:lea-andy@tiscali.co.uk)



Storytelling at Wooplaw

**Borders Guid Crack Club's** last event was a Halloween Special at the Eastgate Theatre in Peebles on 30 October.

Music was supplied by the Red Clay Dirt Band and the Peebles Music Centre's Young Musicians. Local storytellers Keith Slatter and Daru McAleece performed and our guest storyteller was Alasdair Taylor. He's Australian and seems to specialise in Irish stories – bizarre but immensely entertaining!

We are currently working on a venue for a regular monthly Sunday night event, quite possibly in Innerleithen, so watch this space. Apart from this our next event is likely to be our 10th Anniversary Story Gathering at Wooplaw Community Woodland near Stow, from Friday 30 July to Sunday 1 August. The main event is always the ceilidh on the Saturday

night, but Saturday and Sunday afternoons are very popular as there are plenty of arts and craft and outdoor activities for children.

For more details contact Keith on 01721 720 883 or [guidcrack@hotmail.com](mailto:guidcrack@hotmail.com)

**Galloway Storytellers** Tony Bonning and Anne Errington are shortly going on their Year of the Tiger tour of (to date) thirteen Dumfries and Galloway schools, as part of the annual Galloway Children's Festivals storytelling tour. GCF, of which Tony is the Director, is also running the annual Medieval Fayre and the children's area of the Wickerman Festival during the summer, both of which heavily feature storytelling. Anne is also currently developing historical storytelling in Ayrshire schools.

Stripey Dog, alias Greg Truckell, is currently developing Tales of Medieval Cairo as well as Shakespeare's Women with his partner Elaine.

Renita Boyle is developing ideas for local schools on the Curriculum for Excellence whilst sending off a manuscript for her latest book, *101 Activities for Parachute Play – Teaching, Telling and Worship*.

**Tony Bonning**

### Blether Tay-gither

is Tayside and North Fife's storytelling group and we're passionate about bringing storytelling to new places and audiences. Over the last six months we've been running our own workshops, events and our popular monthly meetings.

We appeared on YouTube as part of the Big Man Walking Festival, and we had a very atmospheric storytelling event on the HM Frigate Unicorn, as part of the Tayroots Festival. As a 'Festival on Tour' partner of the Scottish International Storytelling Festival we welcomed Sean Choolburra from the other side

of the world. Sean entertained us with his aboriginal story dances and didgeridoo playing, and showed us how to weave dance and stories together in his workshop. Christmas brought our annual festive event with stories from around the world and January saw a successful rerun of our 'Stories & Samosas' evening in Cupar where we blended stories and good food.

Throughout the year we welcomed new members, old friends and guest tellers and we look forward to the same this year. Keeping us busy will be two joint workshops with three other storytelling groups: BagaTelle from Midlothian; the South West Fife group, Kingdom Krack; and Grampian Association of Storytellers (GAS), as well as our own Environmental Storytelling workshop. To find out more visit [www.blethertaygither.org.uk](http://www.blethertaygither.org.uk), join our facebook group, or contact Debbie Maxwell on 07884 018 724 or [debbie@blethertaygither.org.uk](mailto:debbie@blethertaygither.org.uk).

**GAS (Grampian Association of Storytellers)** The autumn of 2009 was an exciting time and a sad time for GAS. We were delighted to hold our first ever storytelling festival, Gadiefest, where local storytellers were joined by Colin McAlister and



Cath Little, as well as representatives from Blether Tay-gither. The enthusiasm of the new was marred by the loss of our honorary president, Stanley Robertson, who died in the summer. In October we usually run an event in conjunction with Doricfest. This year we decided to hold this meeting in memory of Stanley, with Stanley's son Anthony, and daughter Gabrielle sharing with us some of their father's stories and songs.



## Scotland's a Blether

In November we celebrated Halloween with Norma Cameron, a guest who visited us from Canada courtesy of the Scottish International Storytelling Festival, and in December we retreated to the alcoves of a historic Aberdeen pub to celebrate the season with stories.

In Spring 2010 our 'First Friday Flings' are changing to 'Friday Flings' as we move our monthly meetings from the first Friday of the month to the second Friday. In March, we will be entertained and enlightened by the Aberdeen University Storytelling Society, our Friday Fling guests; and the following week, we shall be joining Blether Tay-gither for a joint workshop at the Panmure Arms in Edzell.

For more information on GAS visit: [www.grampianstorytellers.org.uk](http://www.grampianstorytellers.org.uk) or contact Contact Anna Fancett on 07841 715 447 or [gas\\_story@hotmail.com](mailto:gas_story@hotmail.com)

**Hear and Tell** storytelling group was founded around 2003 and we meet once a month in the Braids Room of the Braid Hills Hotel in Edinburgh.

We are what we are, but we seem to be an incubation group, developing fledgling storytellers. There is a gradual influx of keen newcomers, who develop and graduate to higher things, and a few rising stars have become Directory members during their time at the group.

The group has no membership as such, only people who come regularly. The two-hour time slot and the size of the group mean that everyone who comes with a story gets to tell it. There is usually time to discuss the story and give useful feedback on how it might be improved. Performances are not restricted to stories – music, song and poetry have all been heard, while some come simply to listen. The language is usually English, but Scots occasionally makes a welcome appearance.

We meet on the Sunday before the last Friday of the month, to allow people time to prepare material for the Guid Crack Club. Fortunately we have the fliers and the website – [www.hearandtell.org](http://www.hearandtell.org) – to remind us of the dates.

**Kingdom Krack** Storytellers from South East Fife have formed a self-help group with the aim of sharing skills and experience and offering support and encouragement. We first met, appropriately, in a yurt at the Earthship Fife Visitor Centre in Kinghorn where we shared good food and our personal stories. Subsequent meetings have been at Paula's house but we are about to find a permanent venue since membership has grown. We will gain much from the 'Three's a Crowd' workshop day on 20 February with members of Blether Tay-gither and Bagatelle, and hopefully by then we will have chosen a name for one of Scotland's newest regional groups!

For information and to join the mailing list please contact Paula Cowie on 01592 872 722 or [paula@sci-scotland.org.uk](mailto:paula@sci-scotland.org.uk)

### Ayrshire

With every building in Burns National Heritage Park under major reconstruction this year I realised that after seven years of storytelling as Auld Betty Davidson it was time to move on (or should I say 'move in') to our guest house!

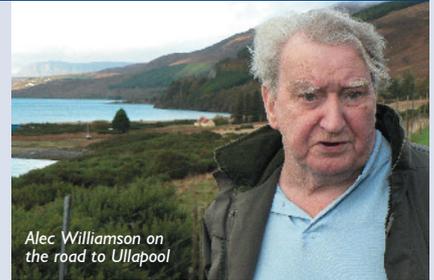
Now the broken down old garage we inherited, but which actually began life as a Blacksmith's Forge, has had a personality change into a Storytelling Theatre and it is a fascinating place to perform!

We have big plans for both local people and visiting guests, with 'Blethers about Burns' from Auld Betty Davidson and her various historical 'friends', including Lady Oswestry, Lady-in-Waiting at the court of George III. And now, with our new Storytelling Theatre, we are able to offer 'Passport to Burns Weekends' – two nights' bed, breakfast and home-cooked Scottish evening meals, plus storytelling, excursions and time for friendly discussion. Our first production is 'Tam O'Shanter', with a chance to experience part of the scary route before visiting Burns Cottage.

**Val Parsley**



Lady Oswestry adds a touch of class



Alec Williamson on the road to Ullapool

**Highlands** 2009 was a good year for Highland storytelling. In the field of education, the children of Inver Primary School in Easter Ross made two video animations based on traditional tales, the first inspired by a local 18th century wind witch.

In July the Shetland Johnsmas Foy festival hosted performances of Rognvald's Journey, a retelling of the 12th century pilgrimage of the Orkney Earl Ronald, in saga, music and traditional story. This was the year of Homecoming, and the Highlands were represented at the great Gathering in Edinburgh's Holyrood Park, with the sharing of stories on a giant map of Scotland. As part of the Homecoming celebrations, Forestry Commission Scotland, together with RCHAMS, promoted events on township and Clearance sites, with stories, songs and music representing the culture of the crofting communities.

Stories of a more recent vintage have been the subject of the project *Their Past Your Future*, hosted by Museums Galleries Scotland, which has involved professionals working with school children to document, in sound and on video, the experiences of people who had experience of WWII. These included tales of incredible bravery and fortitude from survivors of the battle of St Valery, who spent most of their war in POW camps.

Another exciting landmark in Highland storytelling has been an ongoing project supported by the Highland Council and the Cultural Bridges fund, to record Alec Williamson, the great Ross-shire Traveller storyteller, who is unique in that he tells his stories fluently in both Gaelic and English. Now 77, Alec spent the first two decades of his life on the road in Scotland and Ireland. As part of the Highland Homecoming celebrations he hosted two minibus trips from Strathpeffer to Ullapool, stopping off at the old campsites and delighting fellow passengers with folk tales, legends, family stories and personal memories of a way of life now long vanished.

**Bob Pegg**



## BOOK BLETHERS

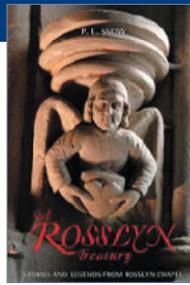
Many compendiums of Scottish stories and folklore are of poor quality but *The Lore of Scotland: A Guide to Scottish Legends* is the exception – an excellent resource for storytellers of all kinds. Its division into regions is invaluable and celebrates Scotland's essential cultural diversity. Jennifer Westwood and Sophia Kingshill are to be congratulated, though sadly Jennifer died before publication, leaving this fine memorial.

Peter Snow's *Rosslyn Treasury* picks up on the lore/legend theme in an eloquent celebration of Rosslyn as a place of story. Finely produced – and told – this is a testimony to the continuing power of legend.

Is that why storytellers continue to make waves as authors? George MacPherson's *Celtic Sea Stories* is a sequel, in the Luath Storyteller series, to his *Highland Myths and Legends*. Again, the material is authentically rooted in tradition and George's ancient art.

Janis Mackay, now living in Caithness, has crafted an outstanding first novel for all ages in *Magnus Fin and the Ocean Quest*. Clearly inspired by the Selkie tales and the seascape beyond her window, Janis has deservedly won the Canongate Kelpie prize for this book – a success echoed by Lari Don whose *First Aid for Fairies* (previously reviewed) triumphed at the Royal Mail Children's Book Awards.

On a different note the second volume of Timothy Neat's epic biography of Hamish Henderson is now out. *Poetry Becomes People* gives us an extraordinary narrative of an extraordinary life. This is not the last word on Hamish but it is a definitive and gripping story to the last. A fine bust of HH by Tony Morrow can now be seen at the Storytelling Centre, courtesy of Tim Neat.



Rounding up other news, Lady Evelyn Stewart Murray's wonderful Gaelic story collection is now published, as predicted, in *Tales from Highland Perthshire*. More of Duncan Williamson's collections are to be issued by Birlinn with new stories added. Also in the making are Stuart McHardy's *History of the Picts*, David Campbell's *Life of Duncan*, and another Ewan McVicar classic on Scottish Song, not to mention *Taffy's Coat Tales*, a collection from Britain's own inimitable Storytelling Laureate ... and its only Spring!

**Donald Smith**

### Michael Kerins Global Domination

No one connected with Scottish storytelling will be surprised to know that, wearing his day bonnet, Michael Kerins has won the Salesman of the Year awards for the pharmaceutical industry in both the UK and Europe.

However this is a coveted and exceptional honour, decided by his peers, and Blethers salutes this remarkable double triumph.

Apart from his superskilled professional persona, Michael is well known in both his working communities for international charity work, and his wholly unique combination of determination and charm.

Incredibly, Michael has topped these awards by being elected Chair of Glasgow Storytellers. Some folk just can't get enough of this guy...

Well done, Michael!

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