

Blethers

Issue 31 Summer 2015

STORIES WITHOUT BORDERS

Stories have the power to cross boundaries, transform perceptions and bridge division. At the same time stories can be distorted and manipulated to create divisions. Good storytelling however is about good communication and being true to our human experiences.

The Scottish International Storytelling Festival (23rd October - 1st November) this year takes the theme of Stories Without Borders to explore global issues through the power of storytelling, including specially commissioned performances exploring War and Peace, Welcoming the Stranger, Between the Generations and Transforming Myths of Landscape.

In 2015 the Festival's reach is focussed particularly on the Middle East and North Africa. Through the development work within the Unesco frameworks, the Festival is pioneering new approaches to Intangible Cultural Heritage and Cultural Diversity by linking traditional arts with dynamic contemporary innovation, so realising the full potential of these resources and practices for present day communities.

Humanity's continuing capacity to devise and share experience through narrative is a precious cultural resource on which the world needs to draw urgently and deeply. Stories cross borders and build bridges if we actively create the contexts, platforms and environments in which this can happen. As the old proverb states, 'Once I have heard my enemies' story, they are no longer my enemies'.

www.tracscotland.org/festivals

DIG WHERE YOU STAND

From 1st September to 30th November the Scottish Storytelling Festival invites everyone to go out and discover local legends that connect your community to the area where you live, including landscape, built heritage and archaeological sites. Free resources, posters and stickers are available as well as ideas for fun storytelling activities. Have a look on

www.tracscotland.org/dig-where-you-stand



Illustration by Sylvia Woodcock Clarke

An inventory of intangible cultural heritage

If you are telling stories, dancing couple and set dances, step-dancing or dancing a Highland Fling, playing traditional tunes or singing traditional songs you are contributing to and performing part of Scotland's 'intangible cultural heritage', although you might not realise it. Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is a term used by Unesco to describe a whole range of practices, beliefs and customs that we regard as important to preserve for future generations.

These may be significant due to their present or possible economic value, but also because they create a certain emotion within us, or because they make us feel as though we belong to something - a country, a tradition, a way of life. Whatever shape they take (songs that can be sung, stories that can be told, crafts that can be mastered...) these things form part of a heritage, and this heritage requires active effort on our part in order to safeguard it.

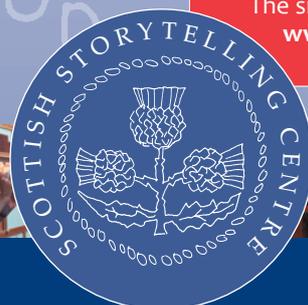
One of the things Unesco proposes to help safeguard ICH is the creation of inventories that allow us to identify what is valued and what needs to be safeguarded and encouraged to flourish.

TRACS's colleagues at Museums and Galleries Scotland have been given the job of looking after the inventory for Scotland, but the idea is that it will be open to everyone to compile. So MGS has created an attractive, interactive website, a wiki, which means you can add your own content.

What the wiki is looking for is examples of the knowledge, practice and skills associated with particular items of heritage. For example, you might cite the Arbroath Smokie as ICH, but it is not the fish itself that counts, but rather the skill, knowledge and custom of smoking fish in that particular part of Scotland. Similarly you would not, for example, put *Can You Sew Cushions* up as an item of ICH, but rather the practice of singing lullabies. The important thing, however, is that it is the people of any particular country who decide what should go on the inventory.

You can see some examples on the website, organised by categories and local authority regions.

The site is also fully searchable and can be found on www.ichscotland.org



Traditional Arts and Culture Scotland SC043009

Scottish Storytelling Centre, 43-45 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1SR

T: 0131 556 9579 E: reception@scottishstorytellingcentre.com

www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk • www.tracscotland.org

Developing my Storytelling Practice

Whenever I am telling stories I always remind myself that this is not about me, but about the people who come to listen to my tales.

I want to create an environment in which my audiences can switch off and let their very own version of my story appear before their inner eye. This plain and audience-centric notion of storytelling could seem at odds with theatre and all its illusion and egocentrism, yet I merge both art forms in my daily practice to create a fully immersive experience. As part of that, I always try to make each story relevant to everyone, irrespective of age, background and abilities, so that each story is not just for a select few.

It all started five years ago when, with Louisa Thornton I founded Louna Productions, with the aim to create storytelling shows that would appeal to a contemporary audience. Louisa and I had bonded over a love for everything deliciously dark and provocative and we began retelling little-known fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm. As a German, I grew up with the uncensored versions of these world-famous stories, and to this very day I still retain a fascination for them. Louisa and I tried to communicate our enthusiasm for folklore to a young adult audience; starting out with storytelling shows at the Fringe Festival, later performing at club nights and offering bite-sized snippets of gory yet comical tales at unusual locations such as derelict factories and outdoor venues. Soon after I became a member of the Scottish Storytelling Directory and



Credit Spudd Connor

Louna Productions started to receive requests for children's shows, so we adapted our tales to make them suitable for younger audiences as well.

I love to experiment with various performance techniques and to collaborate with artists of different disciplines; blurring the boundaries between performing, visual and

conceptual art, scripting and choreographing every gesture, movement and remark in fast-paced shows. As a solo performer and during smaller shows, I am usually a bit more spontaneous, although I always make sure to use my whole body as a medium, in order to convey an idea. Movement, song, puppets and miming are excellent tools for very young audiences, those whose first language is not English and those with sensory impairments or learning difficulties. I try to evaluate my artistic practice on a regular basis and have started recently to experiment with shadow puppets, which I am hugely enjoying.

Keen to add to my repertoire, I have explored stories from many backgrounds and traditions over the years. Over time, Louna Productions moved on from the classical Germanic tales to those of Scottish and Gaelic origin and I made some interesting discoveries - what the woods are to German folklore is mirrored by lochs, rivers and the sea in the Gaelic tradition. Researching these tales led Louisa and I to collaborate with academics and university departments and we started to look for new ways to re-interpret tales that originally contained outdated morals, misogyny and racism. Interested in issues relating to accessibility, I also started to accept commissions from different institutions, charities and arts organisations who wanted their collections and work disseminated in a fun yet sensible way to engage visitors and service users.



I also started to write my own material and am now specialising in educational storytelling - communicating a certain topic or historic event through stories. One of my most exciting commissions has been collaborating with maverick artists collective 85A during Festival 2014 at the Commonwealth Games, writing and performing a 'promenade storytelling experience' for the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow. For this show, called *Niki, Nana and the Frog*, an exploration of the life and work of French artist Niki de Saint-Phalle, I collaborated with a Scottish writer who then invited Louna Productions to the Black Isle to help her bring a new take on traditional Scottish tales to life. Another, more recent, commission was to develop a regular interactive storytelling concept for families with children under the age of five at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.

And this is what I most enjoy about being a storyteller: the variety of topics I get to work with and the people I meet along the way. My practice is predominantly inspired by the people I encounter - after all, interacting with people is what makes stories come to life.

Anna Lehr
anna.lehr@gmx.net

When does a storyteller stop being a storyteller?

There comes a time when stock must be taken and changes must be made. Such a time came for me last year, when I ruminated on how I was becoming rather less quick of mind in storytelling performances. This manifested itself in a very specific way, a sudden blank when a name had to be mentioned - a fellow performer, a person or place name, or the name of a thing in a story.



This is not at all uncommon at my age, or something (as a former psychiatric social worker) that would have me worrying about mental health problems. I could flannel to cover the lapse well for the few seconds needed till the name presented itself to me, but key elements of my storytelling approach are fluidity and sharpness in performance, and not knowing when a break will suddenly pop up fairly dents the confidence.

A core element of storytelling is that the telling should happen 'eye to eye' with no paper reminder visible, and such reminder is what I needed. Rather than keep worrying about it, so fearing I would start projecting uncertainty, I decided to become an ex-storyteller and take my name off the Register.

This did not mean stopping performing. As a singer I have a printed set list lying on the floor, and a thematic show needs a skeleton version of a script that shows who says / sings / shows what when.

Also for several years I have been delivering schools songmaking projects jointly with one of Scotland's finest traditional singers, Christine Kydd. We have developed a tight approach in which we first give the classes a basic experience of Scots traditional song and music, emphasising any local material and references. Then we use tunes (mostly traditional Scots ones, but others can creep in) to write new

song lyrics. These begin with fun new verses, but then become whole story narratives in song. Though some of the narratives come from the topic a class is currently studying, we more often research and share local tales and elements of local history old and new as a basis for new songs. The songs are put on a new dedicated website, then the kids illustrate and record their songs to add to the website. Narrative and story construction and delivery are a core part of the approach.

International interest in our approach has taken Christine and me to Europe. An invitation to Brussels in January this year meant I researched connections between Scotland and Flanders over the centuries. I was startled at the richness of the stories I found, of the sea-based trading, and of the mercenary soldiers, nobility and diplomats travelling in both directions, leading up to the Scots regiments in Flanders in two world wars.

This eventually resulted in June performances in the Netherlands village of Veere where Scots traders had a monopoly for hundreds of years. The Scots Houses Museum in Veere was hosting the multi-national Scottish Diaspora Tapestry, and I did two song-based shows there, one about the Flanders-Scotland links, and one about David Livingstone who features on several of the tapestry panels. Plus, I did

guided tours of the exhibition, pausing to point out and tell of heroes and villains.

One of the surprising Flanders connections I found was a 15th Century Bruges diplomat, Anselm Adornes, who came to Scotland, became a buddy of James III, was eventually made Captain of Linlithgow Palace, and at last murdered by the King's enemies in a North Berwick monastery. His heart was sent back to Bruges, but his body lies under the flagstones in St Michael's Church, over the back wall from my house. What storyteller could resist such material? So in September the Linlithgow Folk Festival will have a story and song show with Adornes a core element.

There is another aspect to this, and a new sphere of action for me. Usually I have been ever rushing on to the next new project or performance, but pulling on my performing reins has given me time in hand to capitalise on the books I have been writing and publishing myself over the last few years, all of them stuffed with Scottish stories, either traditional or historical. I have become an e-publisher, with six books now out as Kindles and more to come. So though I no longer present myself as a storyteller, story continues to be central to what I do and how I do it.

Ewan McVicar
ewanandlinda@btinternet.com

The ABCs of Storytelling: tips, techniques and reflections

F F is for Food

The following, and other articles in this series, are extracts from Michael's forthcoming ebook *The ABCs of Storytelling: Tips, Techniques, and Reflections on StoryCoaching*.

As a story lover, you cannot help but notice the importance of food. It might be Snow White's apple, a wandering traveller's stone soup, or the delicious meals served up by the goat in *One Eye, Two Eyes, and Three Eyes*. In fact, many fairy tales are obsessed with food - or more usually, the lack of it - making us realise that food is just as nourishing in a story as it is in our bellies.

Yet, many storytellers gloss over the eating of food or overlook its potential to nourish. I've been guilty of this myself, simply telling my audience that Snow White bit into the apple; or quickly miming sipping soup or making rudimentary gulping gestures to indicate my character's table manners ('gulp, gulp... yum, yum').

Given that food assumes such an important role in stories, why not express an appetite for it? Give our attention to searching for it, eating it, savouring it? Why do we pass over it so quickly? Is it because we've been taught it's rude to eat in front of others? Should we show our audience the enjoyment of food rather than simply telling them?

The lesson of food was one I learned some years ago while studying at the International School of Storytelling at Emerson College. I was about to go on stage to tell the comical Iranian story, *The Forty Fortunes*. During the story, the main character Ahmed eats dates on three occasions, each one marking an important progression in the story. In fact, the eating of each date marks a step closer to what he believes to be his impending doom.

Before going on, my mentor Roi Gal-Or took me aside and gave me a



wonderful piece of advice: 'When you eat the dates' he said, 'take the time to enjoy them, really savour them, taste them. They're very important.' Indeed, they turned out to be more important than I could have imagined.

On the first occasion, I mimed taking a date, smelled it lovingly, and popped it into my mouth. I rolled it around with my tongue, closed my eyes, and imagined its sweet taste. 'Hmmm' I murmured. 'Hmmm' echoed my audience in mouth-watering appreciation. I stared into their hungry eyes, paused, and swallowed ... before spitting the stone into my hand. Laughter rippled through the audience.

On the second occasion in the story, I took my time with the date. I savoured the moment, smelling it, licking it, and taking little bites, before chewing it and spitting out the stone joyously into the air. Even more laughter.

On the third and final occasion, and with Ahmed thinking that this would be his last date, I took even more time with the tasting. I sniffed, I licked, I gently placed the imaginary fruit on my tongue and slowly and sensuously drew it into my mouth letting every nuance of pleasure fill my being. I sucked every last drop of sweetness from

that date, imagining it to be my last morsel of pleasure on earth. The audience licked its lips and leaned forward.

Then it happened. Don't ask where it came from but what happened next simply seemed a natural extension of Ahmed's character. As I 'swallowed' the date, I 'choked' on the stone. I coughed, I sputtered, I gagged. A woman in the audience screamed. And in that moment, I suddenly realised why Roi had told me to enjoy the food. It was a direct way of connecting with my audience at a level I'd not imagined. Judging from that woman's scream and the concerned look on the faces looking up at me, I had convinced my audience that I was really choking ...

on an imaginary date stone!

I stopped, spit out the offending stone into my hand and showed 'it' to them reassuringly. 'Look' I said, 'It's nothing, I'm ok ... really ... nothing to worry about.' Momentarily caught in the web of disbelief, the audience shook themselves free, roared with laughter, and broke into raucous applause. I winked at Roi smiling in the back row.

The story was a great success because I'd paid attention to eating my food. So whether you're a princess eating an apple, a starving man eating his last crust of bread, a king sipping on a fine wine, or a condemned man eating his last date, take the time to enjoy your meal. Your audience will leave the table feeling nourished as well as entertained.

Michael Williams
iamthestoryteller@gmail.com

If you are interested in enjoying imaginary food and improving your storytelling skills at the same time, contact Michael Williams to talk about how story coaching might help you. Visit www.michaelwilliamsstorycoaching.com or email iamthestoryteller@gmail.com

Amari, Immortal Valley of Story



The call to adventure came in the form of an email, and my response felt like a pull from the centre of my being. It was an appeal from the Friends of Amari, who needed help to explore future directions. The Friends of Amari is an association devoted to the revitalisation of the village and the valley of Amari in Crete through storytelling and through supporting local cultural initiatives, working in harmony with nature, the land and its people. Their values chimed with my own and felt like an irresistible song drawing me to the island of Crete.

In Rethymno I was warmly greeted by Arjen and our host Stella Kassimati, whose family connections with Amari spanned generations. As we drove up to the mountains, Stella spoke of the history of the valley: *Amari* means 'immortal' and Mount Psiloritis is the mythical birthplace of Zeus. It was here, in this breathtaking landscape, that I began to truly imagine the ancient Greek gods roaming the land, something that had escaped me at the spectacular tourist attraction of Knossos. We passed olive groves with ancient trees, one of which is 1200 years old and is a living symbol of the tradition and agriculture which has sustained people in the valley for thousands of years.



On our first evening Stella guided us round the village of Amari. We visited the heritage museum, climbed the old bell tower and heard stories of local characters and of how magical the village looked, before the arrival of electricity, when lanterns lit the streets and people's homes.

Early next morning I joined the other European storytellers in visiting the offices of the municipality, where we were welcomed by local dignitaries and given an explanation of modern challenges facing Amari. The valley is an area of unique un-spoilt beauty, ecological interest and agriculture, yet the old ways alone are no longer enough to sustain it and many young people move away to find work.



The government would like to build a wind farm, which has happened in other mountain regions of Crete to the detriment of wildlife, and the residents of Amari oppose this. These problems are common to many remote areas, like the Highlands where I grew up, but as I listened I had a sense that with imagination and determination there could be hope for a better future.

We travelled high into the mountains led by Dimitri, a friend of the shepherds we were to visit, and Eleni, a pioneer of ecological tourism in the area. We watched a demonstration of traditional cheesemaking in a shepherd bothy reminiscent of old highland dwellings. It had a roaring fire inside, a hole in the roof for smoke to escape and a big cauldron of cheese, stirred by hand. Then we ascended to the highest well on Mt Psiloritis, the well of life, to refill our water bottles and discovered plant fossils strewn all over the dusty track.

All our wonderful experiences in the Amari valley had the purpose of imbuing us with the knowledge and sense of place we needed to undertake our task as storytellers. It was necessary to feast on the delicious organic produce, visit the festivals, drink from the wells and enjoy the wine. We needed to understand the unique qualities that visitors to Amari experience, as well as the challenges facing the Valley.

On day three we gathered in the village hall around a lit candle.

Seven storytellers were tasked to discover a new story for the Friends of Amari, guided by an eighth who took the role of creative facilitator, her expert techniques, songs and timkeeping keeping us focused. Our challenge? To present clear proposals on how, through storytelling and the arts, the Friends of Amari could build a community connected to the land, where the relationship between visitors and the valley would be symbiotic, following a principle of reciprocity.

Of course storytelling is not a first-aid patch for the wounds of a society in decline, nor do storytellers have the power to change legislation which prevents artisan cheese makers and other cottage industries from selling their wares, but what storytelling can do is re-ignite a sense of pride and share the stories. It can encourage us to imagine different ways of being and with these new imaginings understand that we are not powerless in the face of change, that with strength and ingenuity we can shape our future. After all, for something to exist it must first be imagined. Storytelling can call us to action and importantly, in the case of Amari, encourage a re-connection with the source of myth and the strength of ancestors, whose generations of experience stand behind the people of the valley as they face the uncertainty of changing times.

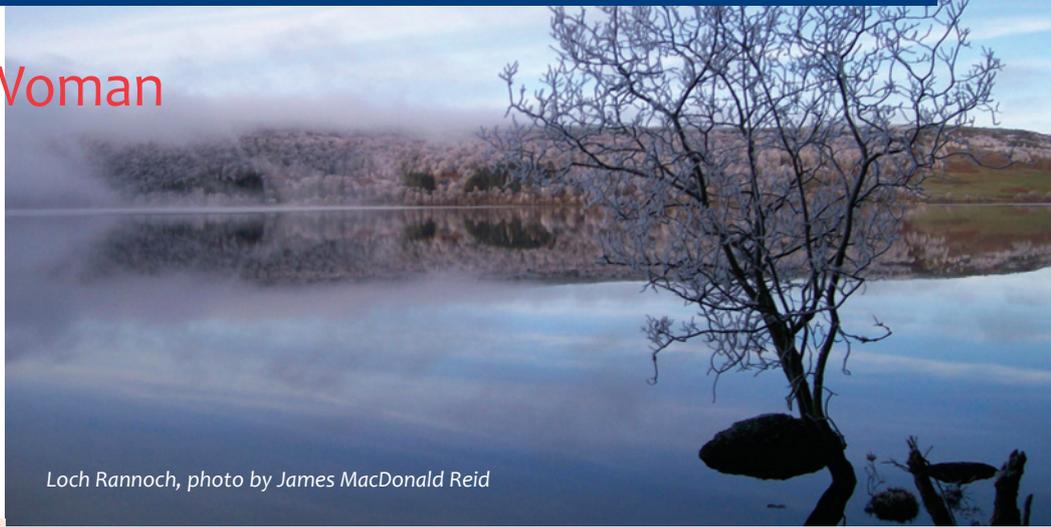
Our task to provide storytelling advice and inspiration may be complete, but this is only the beginning of an exciting new journey for the Friends of Amari, and one I would like to be part of. There is a well of return in Amari and I made certain to drink from it.

Jane Mather

magicalnaturestories@gmail.com

Tales of the Old Woman

When I was 16 I walked across Rannoch Moor. It wasn't as an exercise or an adventure, but simply the most direct route to get from Blair Atholl to the west coast. With neither a road nor a rail crossing, walking was the only option and I walked long distances frequently.



Loch Rannoch, photo by James MacDonald Reid

To get to the edge of the moor, I hitch-hiked in stages along the Tummel road until its end at Rannoch Station. From there the distinct form of the mountain Buachaille Éite Mór is clearly visible across the moor to the southwest and, without a map, I used the mountain as a point of reference. Although it was early summer, there was a strong, steady wind from the west which kept the day cool and constantly tried to hold me back from my journey. After hiking along the north shore of Loch Laidon for most of its length, I noticed a small, ruined stone hut a short way up the hillside to my right. With a small supply of food in my rucksack, I climbed up there to take a short, sheltered break and to feed myself. As I approached the roofless ruin, I noticed small puffs of smoke rising only to disappear in the wind. There, in the lee of the highest remaining wall was an old man (old to me, anyway) by a tiny campfire. He wore a dark, heavy overcoat and had dark hair and a sunburned face with a few days' growth of beard.

He looked up at me, a bit apprehensively at first, and then offered me a can of tea. He was obviously not a recreational hiker; his canvass satchel was not of the sporting type. I suppose he was a traditional Traveller, or perhaps a fugitive, or simply homeless. I didn't ask; nor did he ask me about myself. If he told me his name, I've forgotten it. But we talked a bit about the weather and then about the moor itself. He spoke in Scots but knew the Gaelic names of places and pronounced them with ease and fluency.

He then told me about a hunter on the north side of Rannoch Moor who had encountered an old woman who lived with a herd of deer. His description of this woman reminded me of tales I had heard before, of a woman who lived in the wilderness with only the wild animals for company. She was frightening, but could be helpful if treated with kindness. The stories that I had heard before had no specific place, but he insisted that it all happened on Rannoch Moor and he named each place with precise detail. After probably less than an hour, I carried on walking to reach the Glen Coe road late in the night.

Weeks later, I was with my piping teacher, Alec Macrae, in Pitagowan near Blair Atholl. He was teaching me an old tune with a name that reminded me of this story I'd heard from the strange man in the roofless hut. I asked him if he knew this tale. He did indeed and he told me his version. Later, he showed me the spot on a mountainside where the hunter met the old woman and her deer. Over the following years, I learned more and more, bits and pieces, from gamekeepers and others in that area. The setting of the stories was always the forest and moorland overlooked by the strikingly shaped mountain of Schiehallion, which stands at the very centre of Scotland. Although at that stage I was not consciously seeking stories, but rather songs, pipe tunes, dances and customs, the tales tended to come along with the rest, though often in fragments or in passing references.

As I reached my twenties, I wandered in Slavic lands; Serbia, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Slovakia. In northern Slovakia, along the Polish border, there is a distinctive

freestanding mountain called Babia Hora. Although it's not quite the same shape as Schiehallion, it seems to have the same prominence over the landscape. And the name is intriguing, as it means 'The Old-Woman's Mountain'. So I asked local people for tales of an old woman. Although the stories I heard from them were not so specific, the old woman in them was similar in many respects to those I heard in Rannoch and in eastern Serbia. Further, all of them referred to this woman as Ježi Baba. Now, some of the versions of the Gaelic tales collected in times past called the old woman *Cailleach Bhiorra* (The Prickly Old-Woman - though none of those I heard orally used this name) so there could be a very direct parallel that dates back to prehistory. For in Slovak the word baba means an old woman; ježi means 'prickly'. 'jež' is a hedgehog.



I often tell these tales from the Gaelic lore, together with the pipe tune associated with them, and related songs. As complete stories, I've cobbled them together somewhat from several different sources. But I retain the places and the details that I heard from the people I met who shared them with me. And I always have in the back of my mind the strange man in the dark overcoat in the ruined hut on Rannoch Moor and the way he told me his version.

James MacDonald Reid
drumalban@gmail.com

Keeping Alive the Oral Tradition

In 1609 James VI imprisoned many clan leaders on a ship in order to exact promises of obedience from them. One of the key concessions the clan leaders were forced to make, in what would become known as the Statutes of Iona, was to banish the powerful *Seanachaidhean*, or storytellers, from their courts.

Today, there are more than a hundred storytellers active in Scotland, there are many clan historians globally, but there are perhaps only two *clan storytellers* still practising in Scotland, in defiance of the 400 years old ban: Scot AnSgeulaiche, for Chief Maclean, and Paraig MacNeil, for the Clan Gregor Society. Both Scot and Paraig gather material from three sources: published books, archives and from the oral tradition. It's surprising just how much is still available from talking to people. The internet on the other hand is not a good place to research ancient tales, the material you can find there is usually shallow and much repeated.



A *Seanachaidh* is a keeper of history, genealogy, agreements and stories, gathered and recounted orally. The English word 'storyteller' is used to translate this role, but clearly underestimates the remit. The role is often hereditary and encompasses the full opus of a clan's history. A Bard is a performance poet. The art was strictly governed, both for how the poems were composed (for example, in *Dàn Direach's* mode of alliteration, stress and meter) and in the subject matter, usually limited to praising the chief, hunting scenes, laments and such. A Bard is similar to the modern Poet Laureate. Paraig MacNeil's job as a Bard is to extol the virtues of clan Gregor people, ancient and current and to decry the decriers. This however does not mean all panegyric spin. There were chiefs across all the clans which the bards have said very little of, because they didn't merit it. In some clans, these

roles of Bard and *Seanachaidh* would be combined within one person; in others, they might be further subdivided into lawyers, musicians and clerks of written record.

There's an old Irish belief, according to Scot, that a bard could recite a satire against an unworthy chief and bring him out in hives and boils, blemishing his body so that under *Brehon* law he'd have to stand down. This sounds a bit fanciful, but we all know that any regime can be brought down by adverse public opinion. And poetry and song were powerful means of forming public opinion and responding to it at the time, equivalent to TV and newspapers nowadays.

James VI understood this very well. After centuries of trying to subjugate the MacDonalds of the Isles and other independent clandoms, he finally realised that he could only succeed by extirpating the propagandists, the life blood of the clan chief and the clan pride. The Statutes of Iona sought to banish 'vagabound, baird, juglouris and suche lyke', because they were powerful inciters of unrest, at least from James's domineering viewpoint. If you take away the memory of a people, how strong can they stand against you?

Storytellers disappeared with the dismantling of the clan system. In more recent times the desire for *clann* has grown and birthed the modern clan societies, yet the role of poet or storyteller was not reinstated. A lot of modern clans simply don't understand what a *Seanachaidh* does. Many clan societies have custodians of written word, and that is absolutely invaluable, but it is a passive role. Knowledge is not yours until it's in your head, not on the bookshelf. A *Seanachaidh* actively stuffs memory into the clansmen's heads by spirited, inspirational storytelling, song and poetry. Only then do the ordinary clansfolk know and *feel* their history and who they are as a *clann*.



Seanachaidhean today keep history alive. People can see the tradition bearer, hear the traditions, hear how the stories were told. *Hearing* stories is the actual method of transmission, the stories have to be *told*. There is something about a living being telling you a story that no modern technology can equal, there is a value in the human voice. It gives the story credence, gravity. It makes it alive.

Story has a great advantage over simple historical fact: it contains 'human interest'. Tales can connect us to landscape. If you go to the remote Moy Castle on Mull, there is a worn stone high up with the inscription *Deoch agus Biadh le MacCormaig*, 'Drink and food with the son of Cormaig'. It's an exhortation to offer hospitality to that Irish family, and there is a story behind it. In the 1500s the young, displaced chief came back to Moy from Irish exile to recover his family lands from the Dubhart Macleans. His name was Murchadh Gearr, or short, dumpy Murdo. He raised his late father's people and battle lines were drawn with the Duart Macleans. On the eve of battle, Murdo and his Irish lieutenant, MacCormaig, snuck into Aros castle where Maclean slept and he swapped swords with him. In the morning, Maclean realised the switch and that Murdo had shown him mercy. A reconciliation happened, battle was avoided and Murchadh was restored as chief. All that lies behind a worn inscription on remote castle, and it is a story worth knowing. So Scot tells the full tale at least once a year.

Samantha MacKenzie
Samantha@JamieAndClaireTour.co.uk
(Interview with Scot AnSgeulaiche and Paraig MacNeil)

Step Dance in Scotland

I was introduced to step dancing at the age of eleven, when I saw Cape Breton dancer Harvey Beaton and fiddle player Buddy MacMaster perform in Scotland. The following year I attended a course with Harvey at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, on the Isle of Skye.

From there grew my love for the dance and an interest in how Scottish traditions were retained by emigrants and their descendants. The majority of step dancers in Scotland today, including myself, have learned from our Cape Breton cousins and, therefore, the steps are part of a re-introduction of the dance form rather than its revival. Cape Breton is an island which is part of the Maritime Province of Nova Scotia, on the East Coast of Canada, where many Gaelic speaking emigrants settled from the mid-eighteenth century through the nineteenth century. Although the Gaels left with very few personal belongings, they took with them a wealth of culture - their language, their religion, their stories, their music and their dance.

For a dance tradition to continue, and continue in a way it may grow and flourish, it is important that the tradition exist within a social context. In Cape Breton, particularly in Inverness County, step dance is both a solo dance and also retained within the square sets and the Scotch four (a four person social dance brought over from Scotland). The social setting creates a natural context for cultural transmission which allows for variation and spontaneity. In other parts of Canada, where step dance is purely a performance dance, routines and competitions are gradually standardising the steps. This formalised mode of transmission is also the norm in Scotland, where the majority of step dancers have learned through organised classes and workshops. When I am teaching, I find that my pupils prefer to learn a definitive version of a step and then, to help them remember that step, they like to put the steps into a set order or routine.



This leaves less room for variation, whereas, at a square dance or house cèilidh, people pick up new steps by watching other dancers, and, more importantly, responding spontaneously to the music.

Music sessions like house cèilidhs are social contexts, where tunes are passed around and shared and musicians are able to learn from each other and pick up tunes by ear. The momentum of a session is built by the shared energy, as musicians follow each other's inflections and cadences. In Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island this ethos also extends to the dancers, and dance rhythms are a central and integral part of musical performance. From dance halls to festival stages, the energy and driving force behind the music comes from the constant rhythm of foot percussion and step dance, and musicians will almost always sit down to play so that they may tap their foot.

In Scotland on the other hand there is no such close interrelation

between the music and the dance, which means that often the tempo of strathspeys is too slow for the Cape Breton style steps whilst the reels are more often than not played too fast.

It would be great to see step dancing as a regular and integral part of the music scene in Scotland too. A dancer getting up at a session shouldn't be a grand, show-off performance, step dance should be both a response to the music and also the driver behind the music, like a percussive instrument.

At the moment the traditional music scene in Scotland is a burning furnace of activity, full of vibrance, colour and excitement - the country is alight with fèisean, workshops, summer schools, sessions, concerts and festivals. It is an exciting time for traditional music and I believe there is an opportunity for step dance to be further developed and integrated within this sphere. There is also a strong movement towards fusion in traditional music and it would be great to see this movement embraced by dancers experimenting and combining different styles and forms. When I teach workshops I hope to impart the importance of not only passing the tradition on, but of allowing the tradition to take the natural course of growth and regeneration. Social integration is a vital part of this regeneration and I would encourage step dancers to use their steps during social dances such as a Strip the Willow or a Dashing White Sergeant and also to join in with musicians at a session. After all the tunes are calling us to respond with rhythm, with movement - with dance!

Sophie Stephenson
sophie@sophabulous.co.uk
www.sophabulous.co.uk



Credit Ruth O' Sullivan

Mairi's Musical Musings

It's hard to describe what I do these days. My music has melded and fizzed and integrated into something new... again. This time it feels more daring, spontaneous, rooted, elemental and textured.

In 1990, after 4 years at the Guildhall school of music and three years in the viola section of the Kreisler String Orchestra, I hit the road and spent a year backpacking in Mexico. Leaving somewhat unraveled emotionally and in a fuzz, I headed for Cape Breton in Canada where I first saw Scottish step dancing and fiddling: the diaspora's account of our culture. This discovery of our native, indigenous stepping provoked a profound keening that held me in its grip for many years after. Like a piece of my heart missing, it was like a pulse that I knew but didn't know... a pulse that left Scotland and went West with the hundreds of thousands of Scots that settled in Cape Breton and beyond between 1750 and 1850. A powerful sense of loss, confusion and sadness hit me hard. This was met with the cheery outlook of Cape Bretoners - also well aware of the tearing apart of a culture - but they would jolly me along with their generosity and kind words. Minnie McMaster, mother of Natalie McMaster, took me in and taught me my first steps and this was followed by many more trips to learn the steps and the music that went with them. It's a very particular lift and tempo, one that I instinctively wanted to learn.

I was particularly drawn to step dancing because I love playing the drums with my feet - intricate rhythms that play against the tunes, and I wanted to understand how to play the fiddle for dancing. In many ways the classical and aural traditions are polar opposites, but in this little exploration I found common ground. I remember playing Tchaikovsky's serenade for strings with the Kreisler String Orchestra. The music was sublime but in the slow movements could

get a bit limp and lose direction, and the most effective way to maintain momentum was to subdivide the beats. We'd be playing this gorgeous slow music, bows gliding up and down the strings and underneath, silently, we were counting and subdividing the beats like ducks' feet. Step dancing is also based on subdividing, on playing with the internal rhythm of the tunes. It's fun, spontaneous and can change every time you do it. A good step dancer can give the tunes great lift and momentum.

The story of this particular time in my life - the crossroads of moving from my classical career into traditional music - is told in *Pulse*. When Dave Gray and I made the album *Pulse*, I felt it was more of a show than a gig and started to dream up this new offering. The result brings together dance, storytelling, live music, animation and recorded tracks. The wonderful director Kath Burlinson is a huge part of it too, with her extraordinary ability to do alchemy with what seem like random elements at first.

So twenty five years after that fateful trip to Cape Breton I'm still exploring beats, gravity, the power of sound and my spiritual and historical roots. Fifteen years of meditation has added layers and levels and allowed a renewed exploration of what our culture is/could be. We have let go of much in Scotland, but we also have new possibilities and fresh outlooks. The audiences' reaction to *Pulse* has been overwhelming so far and I'm very excited about what is yet to come.

Mairi Campbell
mairi_campbell@hotmail.com
www.mairicampbell.co.uk



NOTICE THE LITTLE THINGS

Play the tune as if you were singing it, so the breath of the phrasing is embedded deep. Don't let your bow get bossy - the left hand should lead. Make a connection between your foot tapping and your left hand fingers.

FOOT TAPPING

When I played with the Bella McNabs, we had a wide range of foot tappings. Fiona, the piano player, was a heel/toe roll; Derek Hoy was a knee bouncer. I got into that too as I liked the way it lifted the tune; Dave Francis and John Young were foot slappers. The slap, the quick-lift, the knee bounce and the heel/toe roll. Heel toe roll is best if you're playing for step dancing as it tends to hold the offbeat longer.

A Song and a Brew

A Song and a Brew is a project that started in January 2015 with the aim to create opportunities for parents to develop their musical confidence. Community musician Gica Loening and I launched the project after receiving funding from the Youth Music Initiative to develop work with children and families attending Craigmoynton Early Years Centre in North Edinburgh. The project had three interweaving strands: a strand aimed at children, a strand aimed at parents, and a strand aimed at staff.

After a few months at North Edinburgh Arts, from April 2015 the group was finally based at the Early Years Centre. This allowed all participating children to come to the first part of each session even if their parent could not attend.



By repeating the same songs week after week, the children became familiar with them and knew where to join in. A recording of the group session at the end of June showed how much more vocally participative the children had become over time. We ended each session with the children lying down for a rest and listening to the Fairy Lullaby played by Gica on the fiddle.

The great strength of oral storytelling and song is that it promotes language and literacy skills within the context of warm and nurturing relationships.



'As the adult's face communicates her thrill and delight in the child....the child sees the gleam in the adult's eyes. This specific and unique visual experience directly stimulates the infant's brain, which in turn produces pleasure chemicals'. Schore, 1994

The children are nurtured through plenty of eye contact and smiles. Therapist Patsy Cogen has described eye contact as 'the bridge between two brains'.

In terms of work with the parents, we knew they would be reluctant to engage with the singing and musical activities, so we included their children in the sessions to lead the way. Each week we began with a song and story session for the parents and children, with the same pattern each time and lots of repetition of material, so it became familiar to both the parents and the children.

The children then returned to the nursery with the staff, and the parents had some time to explore their own musical creativity. We began this process with ice-breaking musical and storytelling activities, which helped the parents to feel comfortable. We obviously were successful in this because we had more than one parent who remarked that they did not usually enjoy groups but they enjoyed coming to this one.

We had one participant in particular, a father called Davey, who attended throughout the life of the group.

He told us he was a great fan of Irish music and of Elvis Presley and began bringing CDs, which he sang along to. When the group was introduced to the recording studio in North Edinburgh Arts to record some ukulele tunes and songs, Davey became excited about the prospect of recording some Elvis tracks. His father had died the previous year and his party piece had been *Wooden Heart*, so David began singing the song and was keen to put it on a CD for his mother as that, he said, 'would make her greet'. During the duration of the project Davey moved from singing along to a CD to singing alone to the children in the Early Years Centre and performing at a big family celebration. By the end of the project Davey had cut a CD with two Elvis songs and performed at an informal launch at the Scottish Storytelling Centre.

We were able to support Davey to achieve something he was immensely proud of and he has been very vocal about what the group has meant to him and how it has improved his confidence, not only in a musical sense.

Finally, we ran two twilight staff development sessions exploring both the theory behind our work methods and creating opportunities for staff to develop their own confidence in leading music and story activities. Staff engagement with the overall project was greatly enhanced by these sessions, and we were delighted when Melody, a member of staff, brought great fun to the CD launch at the SSC by dancing along to Davey singing his Elvis songs live. Nicky Leadbetter, Senior Early Years Practitioner, even allowed herself to be nudged gently out of her comfort zone and recorded the story of *The wee tiny man* at NEA just last week!

It has been a pleasure and a privilege to be involved in working with this group of parents, children and staff. We can see that little by little a culture of enjoying music, song and story is growing and we are very hopeful that we will be able to continue building upon the work we have begun.

Claire McNicol
claire_dela_lune@yahoo.com

Photographs by Ruth Barrie.

CREATE A LEGEND ... WIN A PRIZE!

LEGENDS have a habit of travelling around - through time, from language to language, between cultures - attaching themselves to different places, and cunningly adapting to their new homes.

The story below is taken from my collection *Argyll Folk Tales*, which will be published in November 2015. While this particular telling is from Mull, there are versions from other places in Scotland, including Montrose and Blair Atholl.

The challenge is to adapt *A Ceilidh Story* to your own area. I've chosen it because it could happen almost anywhere, since its basic elements are pretty much universal. For the three most imaginative and ingenious adaptations, I'm offering as prizes one copy of my collection



Highland Folk Tales, and one of **The Little Book of Hogmanay** (both published by The History Press); and a copy of my CD of Cairngorm stories with music, **Between Two Worlds**.

First, read the story. I hope you enjoy it - it's one of my favourites.

A CEILIDH STORY

In the days before radio and television, before computers and mobile phones, before video games and streaming, people would meet in the evenings to gossip and sing, tell stories and jokes, ask riddles and play a little music; they would often take with them some domestic work such as darning, or sewing, or spinning with the drop spindle. In the parts of Scotland where Gaelic was spoken, a gathering like this would be called a *ceilidh*, and the place where it happened would be well known in the community. It could be someone's house, but it might also be another important location; a smithy for instance, a mill, or a kiln for drying corn.

On the southwest coast of Mull there was such a kiln, a place where men and boys gathered to tell stories. They sat in a row around the fire and the owner of the kiln began with his story, followed by the others in turn. The rule they had - their 'law' - was that everyone there, with no exception, should contribute a tale.

On one occasion a young man from another district was present at the session. He didn't know the house rules, and when it came to his turn, he had no story to tell. The regulars were outraged at this flouting of protocol. Blows were close to being struck, when the owner suggested that the young man go outside to put some straw in a hole in the wall, as it was letting in the wind.

The lad stepped out into the dusk, glad to be away from the prickly atmosphere inside the kiln. There was indeed a strong wind and, when he looked out to sea, he saw that a ship was being driven dangerously close to the rocks. The boy ran down to the shore and found a small boat, pushed it out, and began to row towards the ship in distress, but the gale caught hold of his little vessel and dragged him out to sea, past Colonsay, Jura and Islay, and over to the north coast of Ireland.

The young man was cast up in the mouth of a creek, near to a cottage that was on a hill above the shore. When he enquired at the cottage, he found an old woman and a young girl living there. The old woman's husband, the father of the girl, had died a few weeks before. He had been a fisherman, and now his boat was idle. The lad from Mull got on well with the old woman, and particularly well with the girl. He knew how to fish too, and so it seemed sensible for him to stay there, marry the daughter, and take over the management of the boat.

The young couple made a good partnership, and it wasn't so long before their first child was born. Quite quickly they had three more children, and the house became filled with the sounds of a happy family, working and playing and eating together. Then one evening the Mull man was out fishing when a great storm rose up, and his boat was blown back over the sea, past Islay, Jura, and Colonsay, to the very place in Mull that he had left all those years before. He climbed the hill to the kiln, which was still there above the beach. When he went in, he was astonished to see the same band of men and boys, sitting in just the same places, and none of them looking a year, or even a day older.

The owner of the kiln asked where he had been, and the young man told about the storm, the voyage to Ireland, his wife and four children. 'Well, at last you have a story to tell,' said the owner. The others started to laugh, but the owner hushed them, saying that the lad had been under a spell, and that his experiences had all been a vision conjured up by magic. That may have been true, but it didn't stop him mourning the wife and children who were as real to him as if they'd been flesh and blood.

People say that the owner of the kiln was a master of the black art, and was himself responsible for the young man's vision, but that surely is an old wives' tale.

Now think about how you could retell this story. You can omit the first paragraph entirely if you want, and be as wildly imaginative as you like. For example:

- Your legend can be set in the past, present or future.
- Its location can be anywhere in the area in which you live.
- Your protagonist may leave the storytelling venue on any pretext whatsoever.
- He or she can cross a river, a road, a lake or a galaxy, if there's a good reason to do so.

- The reason for remaining on the other side of the great divide doesn't need to be a wife and family.
- The return to the starting point can be the result of a storm, but could just as easily be a mysterious voice calling out, a message brought by a carrier pigeon etc.

You get the idea. Go where your imagination takes you, as long as your story is set in what's recognisably the area where you live, and as long as you preserve the basic elements of the original tale:

- A storytelling gathering from which an individual is expelled because he or she doesn't have a story to tell.
- A journey to a new set of circumstances.
- A motive for staying in the new location.
- Eventual return, for whatever reason.
- Discovery that nothing has changed.
- 'At last you have a story to tell.'

Bob Pegg
catsback@gmail.com

You can find out more and download the story on www.tracscotland.org/tracs/resources/a-ceilidh-story

Book Blethers

Scottish Borders Folktales by James Spence is another Scottish triumph in the ambitious plan of The History Press to provide every region of Britain with a storytelling volume. James Spence has risen to the challenge with a classic volume, ranging from ancient folklore to community reminiscence. The stories are arranged broadly in terms of their time period though there is also a focus on providing stories suitable for children at the start. The whole collection is deeply felt as part of this storyteller's roots and identity, and he writes throughout in a melodious natural Scots. There have been many collections of Scottish Borders stories in past times but this one is for now and the future, and holds its head up with the very best.

Next up from History Press is Bob Pegg's **Argyll Folk Tales**. This begins with a fascinating introduction that acknowledges both the succeeding generations of storytellers, but also the way that Argyll collectors have defined Scotland's place in world storytelling. Again this is an excellent collection covering the full range of Argyllshire stories across the centuries. There is a special tribute to Duncan Williamson as the Argyllshire storyteller *par excellence* in modern times. No-one interested in Scotland's living traditions should miss out on this volume, which will be released in November. The book carries illustrations by the author himself, which is also the case with James Spence. Good storytellers clearly have strong visual imaginations!

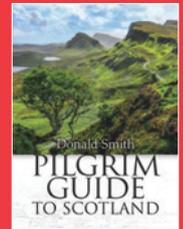
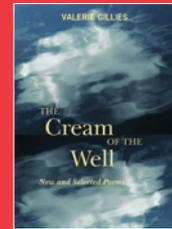
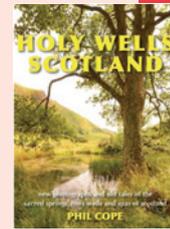
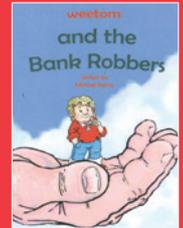
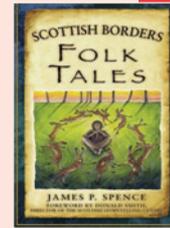
In her latest novel for young readers **Wild Song**, Janis Mackay continues her special blend of storytelling and writing. This book takes us to Finland and explores the healing power of friendship, nature, and the sometimes hurtful requirements of truth.

The sinuous rhythms and evocations of sea or land reflect the author's own journey to explore that northern land's powerful mythology. It's a fine read for all age groups.

weetom and the Bank Robbers is also devoted to capturing the spirit and style of a distinctive storyteller. Michael Kerins' weetom stories have achieved classic status, often turning on the emotional connection between small tom and his gigantic yet gentle Uncle Dan. The book is beautifully illustrated by Elaine Davis and produced by Dominic Kerins under a designated label Big Pants Ltd-Books.

Finally on the wider front of intangible heritage, Tracs recently hosted a day on Scotland's Wells and Sacred Springs. This brought together three writers of new volumes relating to this subject. Phil Cope's **Holy Wells Scotland** is a superbly illustrated guide to the known and little known wells across our landscape. Phil Cope deserves profound thanks for helping us to uncover this fantastic heritage. Valerie Gillies' **Cream of the Well** brings together her new and selected poems many of which are explorations of place, journey, pilgrimage and water bubbling from hidden depths. The poems are perfectly pitched and resonant. Donald Smith's **Pilgrim Guide to Scotland** traces 14 pilgrim journeys across Scotland encompassing sacred places, traditions, poems, stories and blessings, based on 25 years of walking by the present writer. This volume is dedicated to the late Andy Hunter, a true pilgrim and loved companion on the road.

Donald Smith
donald@scottishstorytellingcentre.com



SCOTTISH BORDERS FOLKTALES

James Spence
The History Press
ISBN 9780750961387

ARGYLL FOLK TALES

Bob Pegg
The History Press

WILD SONG

Janis Mackay
Piccadilly Press
ISBN 9781848124424

WEETOM AND THE BANK ROBBERS

Michael Kerins
Big Pants Ltd-Books

HOLY WELLS SCOTLAND

Phil Cope
Seren
ISBN 9781781722589

CREAM OF THE WELL

Valerie Gillies
Luath Press Ltd
ISBN 9781910021682

PILGRIM GUIDE TO SCOTLAND

Donald Smith
St Andrew Press
ISBN 9780861538621