

Year of Stories' Blogs 1-3 for Kist o Riches Storytelling Workshop

Blog 1: Life Stories from the Kist

As part of Scotland's Year of Stories, Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches ([Link to www.tobarandualchais.co.uk](http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk)) is organising two events which will take place at the Scottish Storytelling Centre in Edinburgh at the beginning of May.

In the first event 'Learning from the Kist: Storytelling Workshop', two highly experienced storytellers, Donald Smith and Ruth Kirkpatrick will demonstrate a variety of storytelling techniques and will select a few stories from the many to be found on the Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches website and re-tell them in a way which demonstrates some of these techniques. Participants will get the chance to practise these skills.

While researching stories on the Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches for the workshop, **Donald Smith** has come across many recordings which have caught his interest and in this first blog he focusses on the stories and experiences of the Scottish Traveller community:-

"The great contribution of the website is to show how the extraordinary folktales sit in the context of everyday life."

Browsing this site you hear people talking about their lives in Scotland. They include islanders, highlanders, lowlanders and borderers, speaking in Scots, English and Gaelic. But not least amongst these voices are the Scottish Travellers whose experiences are directly from the front edges of existence.

There are vivid insights into nature, sometimes with a distinct twist. Take John Stewart's tale ([Track 34599](#)) ([Link to https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/34599?l=en](https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/34599?l=en)) of a crow pecking at a tattie, when a brave whitret [weasel] attacked it by leaping on its back. The cow took off with the whitret still hanging on, but the fierce wee creature bit into the crow's neck, it fell back to earth and the weasel escaped. According to John, a veteran humorist, the whitret kept the crow's wing's outstretched like a glider.

It is easy to romanticise the Traveller lifestyle, with its love of nature, but it was a hard life and the Travellers exercised restrictions and taboos on women. A powerful direct testimony of this is Duncan Williamson's account ([Track 34511](#)) ([Link to https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/34511?l=en](https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/34511?l=en)) of how his Aunt Rachel decided to leave Argyll with a Traveller man, Johnnie Burke. Duncan's father pursued them up the Rest and Be Thankful road, beat up the young Traveller, and brought Rachel home. Rachel never married and after her parents were dead, she committed suicide, aged forty-six.

The Traveller defensiveness was of course a reaction to the prejudice and bad treatment they often received, and still receive, from the settled population. There are numerous accounts of unfriendly (and also friendly) encounters, oppressive police behaviour, and constant pressure to 'move on' from traditional camp sites.

Recent research has revealed how in the twentieth century when many of the Kist o Riches recordings were made, 'The Tinker Housing Experiment' was forcibly removing children from Traveller families and seeking to eradicate their indigenous culture. The horror of this has to be set alongside the Travellers' love of children, and their willingness to adopt illegitimate children who were outcast from the majority community.

You can hear a lot of life wisdom in the recordings of Betsy Whyte. Her folk tales and memories run together. She comments directly ([Track 77535](#)) ([Link to https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/77535?l=en](https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/77535?l=en)) on violence between men and women, often related to drinking. But she also observes how women gained in authority in Traveller society as they grew older, and how mothers and grandmothers became important figures in the social hierarchy.

This is confirmed by Sheila Stewart who recounts how she was not allowed to tell certain stories or sing songs which were restricted to her mother Belle Stewart. Only after her mother's death, for example, did Sheila sing the family's keynote song 'Queen Among the Heather'. Betsy and Sheila both went on to write powerfully and eloquently about their lives, but the recordings here represent an earlier layer of first hand testimony.

The great contribution of the site is to show how the extraordinary folktales sit in the context of everyday life. Stanley Robertson, the North-east storyteller, describes the Lumphanan Road as the magical journey of his childhood, leaving the city to travel once more. And one oak tree there he says was his 'Tree of Life' ([Track 42818](#)) ([Link to https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/42818?l=en](https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/42818?l=en)). As those who were fortunate to know Stanley will testify that his defining tale was 'Auld Cruivie', which celebrated the ancient oak that came out of its bole on Midsummer to dance with the other trees by the river.

Life in these Traveller recordings is seen in all its complexities.

Donald Smith has been an active participant in Scots and Irish storytelling for over thirty years. He is a regular workshop leader, lecturer and mentor to developing storytellers. Donald started the Scottish International Storytelling Festival and is also a founding member of the Scottish Storytelling Forum and Edinburgh's Guid Crack Club.

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Blog 2: A Hero Called Jack

As part of Scotland's Year of Stories, Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches ([Link to www.tobarandualchais.co.uk](http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk)) is organising two events which will take place at the Scottish Storytelling Centre in Edinburgh at the beginning of May.

Donald Smith is one of the workshop leaders for the 'Learning from the Kist: Storytelling Workshop', and he has been spending time on the Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches website as part of his research for the event.

In his second blog, Donald focusses on the significance of the many 'Jack' stories to be found on the site:-

"Being able to hear these stories is invaluable, as words on the page do not convey the art of storytelling in its full glory."

When it comes to name checking there is one character right out front- Jack. Sometimes this is pronounced more like Jake, and to be fair there are lots of references to Silly Jack and Lazy Jack. But it's all part of an extensive Jack catalogue.

Jack figures most often, though not exclusively, in stories told by the Scottish Travellers. The Traveller storyteller Duncan Williamson explains to Barbara McDermitt (Track 65820) ([Link to https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/65820?l=en](https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/65820?l=en)) that Jack is the Travellers' hero because he is of their own kind. This includes when Jack is lazy or out of luck or lacking in native wit, because Travellers have often had to thole being regarded as losers to some degree.

Yet Jack also has a resilient capacity to come out on top in the end through chance, kindness, or a gallus streak that sees him through. He may be lazy or silly but Jack can still outwit the giant (eg Track 36465). ([Link to https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/36465?l=en](https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/36465?l=en)) The underdog wins out and that makes Jack a Traveller hero. As Duncan comments, through the stories people of all ages, male and female, visualise themselves as Jack.

There is another importance to the Jack tales. They are exemplars of oral traditional storytelling as an art. Take for example the story told by Duncan (Track 29180) ([Link to https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/29180?l=en](https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/29180?l=en)) in which Jack wins the hand of a princess through the help of an ant, a swallow and a salmon. This is a story built in threes as three brothers take three different gifts/blessings, go on three different roads with three sayings, encounter three helpers, and wind up with three different outcomes.

This oral patterning enables memory in the teller and the listeners. The story is something that can be passed on and enjoyed collectively because everyone can hold it in their mind, emotions, and in their visual imagination. Another fine example from

Duncan Williamson's repertoire is the tale of Jack and the Princess on the Glass Hill (Track 28935). ([Link to https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/28935?!=en](https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/28935?!=en)) Being able to hear these stories is invaluable, as words on the page do not convey the art of storytelling in its full glory.

Humour is also to the fore in the Jack stories. The Stewart family of Travellers are prime exponents of an exuberant and sometimes fantastic line of humour. Alex Stewart gives a prime example of this (Track 66728) ([Link to https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/66728?!=en](https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/66728?!=en)) when Lazy Jack nonetheless manages to trick the King into calling him a liar, so winning the contest. Again, hearing this is vital as the story is an exercise in speech rhetoric and pace so that we, the listeners, like the King, are caught off guard. Sheila Stewart continued this family tradition of bravura performance to great effect at festivals and international events.

There is an interesting tension here between family contexts and the way in which Traveller tradition bearers later reached a wider audience with their stories. The Travellers themselves repeatedly say (eg Track 31827) ([Link to https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/31827?!=en](https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/31827?!=en)) that they remember stories and songs along with the family members who told or sang them. Re-telling is a way of commemorating and keeping their ancestors alive. Yet at the same time the Travellers exhibit what you might call 'oral poetics'. Some are undoubted artists, yet for them the human and communal value of their traditions remain paramount.

That leads me to the humane values embedded in many of the tales. There is a life wisdom, compassion, love and a sense of justice. That includes the Jack tales even when they are also deploying humour and counter-cultural heroics. Stanley Robertson, the North-east Traveller is a notable example of this tender art. His key note tale of 'Auld Cruivie' is about living with the generosity of nature, and defying the oppressions of greed. Duncan Williamson's 'Death in a Nut' (Track 36459) ([Link to https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/36459?!=en](https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/36459?!=en)) is about accepting the part death plays in the continuation of life.

Jack is often wise in his foolishness.

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Blog 3: Just Passing the Time?

As part of Scotland's Year of Stories, Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches ([Link to www.tobarandualchais.co.uk](http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk)) is organising two events which will take place at the Scottish Storytelling Centre in Edinburgh at the beginning of May.

Donald Smith is one of the workshop leaders for the 'Learning from the Kist: Storytelling Workshop', and he has been spending time on the Tobar an Dualchais/ Kist o Riches website undertaking research for the event.

In his third blog, Donald looks at the significance of tests, challenges and puzzles in storytelling:-

"Storytelling was, and is, a medium of learning, curiosity and imagination, but it is also a form of entertainment. If the storyteller fails in that primary function all else is lost."

Riddles, guesses and guddicks are just three of the ways contributors describe clever word games. The website is full of them (eg [Track 32660](https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/32660?l=en)) ([Link to https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/32660?l=en](https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/32660?l=en)).

'Fits in the hoose, an oot the hoose, an in the hoose whan aa's deen? The windows.'

'What's got a bed and never lies in it? A river.'

'Fit his twa hauns an ne'er washes its face? A clock.'

'What's flying lying, and standing lying? A peewit's crest.'

Verbal wit and games were ways of passing the time, through long spells of darkness or indifferent weather, without broadband, radio, terrestrial tv or perhaps artificial light. I once asked Willie McPhee - piper, tinsmith and storyteller - why he told stories. And Willie's stories included some epics in which nine brothers went on nine quests, but all delivered in a consummately laidback and relaxing manner. 'Och,' says he, 'it's a good way of passing the time.'

Storytelling was, and is, a medium of learning, curiosity and imagination, but it is also a form of entertainment. If the storyteller fails in that primary function all else is lost.

That is why so many stories contain tests, challenges and puzzles to keep the listener alert. A classic example is 'The Three Questions' which recurs with the same structure but lots of different details. John Stewart ([Track 66102](https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/66102?l=en)) ([Link to https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/66102?l=en](https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/66102?l=en)) gives a popular version in which a king uses three questions to bully a miller into surrendering his daughter.

But the daughter's sweetheart steps up to answer the questions disguised as the miller. He successfully fields 'what is the weight of the moon?', and 'how many stars are there in the sky?', but the clincher is his reply to 'What am I thinking as I speak to you?'. 'You're thinking you are speaking to the miller, but...'. The appeal of this version is threefold: it is witty, the underdogs get the upper hand, and it is told with characteristic Stewart zest.

Inevitably Jack gets in on this act as well, not just outwitting adversaries but solving riddles. In Stanley Robertson's tale ([Track 67481](#)), ([Link to https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/67481?!=en](https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/67481?!=en)) Jack frees the princess from dark enchantment by solving her riddles. According to Duncan Williamson, ([Track 32663](#)), ([Link to https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/32663?!=en](https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/32663?!=en)) prisoners could be freed if they set a riddle none could solve. His example ('Upon Oak Leaves I stand....') caught Hamish Henderson's imagination and inspired his last known poem.

Stories of wit sometimes feature 'wise fools'. The Middle East has Nasruddin or Hodja, while Scotland has Daft Sandy and George Buchanan, the king's fool. This is in itself a humorous inversion as George Buchanan was a famously learned, and very serious, Scottish scholar.

Daft Sandy is a favourite of Duncan Williamson. The point of course is that Sandy is not as daft as he lets on. But there is a further twist when Sandy plays to his daftness in order to outwit authority. So, he tricks a gamekeeper into reporting him to the police, but the evidence found on Sandy turns out to be a bag stuffed with grass with three pheasant feathers sticking out the top. From then on accusations against Sandy are laughed off and he can poach to his heart's content.

George Buchanan often features in Duncan Williamson's repertoire, but he is also a popular character among Gaelic storytellers. George is the contestant on behalf of the king in a Three Questions episode, but more often he uses earthy humour to best the king.

The king asks for 'a bit of chicken' after dinner, but George brings him an 'an old hen' ie an old woman instead. George obtains the king's pardon for knocking off a knight's hat, omitting to mention that the knight's head was in it at the time. The ladies of the court expect to find flowers left beneath their gallants' hats, but George leaves the Queen a turd beneath his headgear. 'Never let us see your face again,' says the king, so on his next appearance George shows them his backside. George is a wily anarchist! The historical Buchanan would have been outraged.

To pauchle the ideas of another scholarly George, the folk tradition is full of what George Davie called 'the democratic intellect.' Perhaps there is a bit more to it than just 'passing the time'.

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