TradFest Edinburgh • Dùn Èideann

TradFest is Edinburgh’s annual showcase of traditional arts and culture and this year it takes place from Wednesday 29th April to Sunday 10th May. TradFest celebrates Scotland’s May festivals - Beltane and Mayday - which traditionally mark the beginning of summer, bringing energy and colour to the capital city as the greening of the year breaks out.

TradFest is a melting pot for song, story, music, dance and craft crossover, presenting opportunities for artists to come together and explore cultural traditions with a contemporary spin.

The traditional arts have always fostered conviviality and social change. Take for example the Galoshens, the Scottish variant of the mummers’ play. In days gone by they took place in both rural and urban settings, usually around Hallowe’en or the New Year. In the play the hero, Galoshen, is slain by his foe but then miraculously revived and restored to life by the good Dr. Brown. With the actors in disguise this was an excuse for high jinks and a bit of fun. However with its basic theme of death and rebirth it could also be seen as a symbol of the cycle of life and one of the ways communities faced the realities of darkness and decay.

Somewhere along the line, communities decided they had little use for Galoshens and they more or less died out as a practice embedded in social life. They lived on in cultural memory though – both in the minds of individuals who had participated in them and in collections by the likes of Edinburgh antiquarian Robert Chambers.

But although this traditional form of expression had virtually died out, the core symbolism of death and resurrection never ceased to resonate with us. There is something primal and satisfying in the simplicity of Galoshens, and its suggestion of a more direct relationship with nature and community, not to mention its potential to critique and ridicule modern society.

So when we apply Dr. Brown’s medicine to any of our traditions and revive them, we are not just reviving a song, story or dance, but a whole range of connections old and new, restoring a sense of how communities can collectively make their own art for their own purposes, either by drawing on what their forebears had made or using it as inspiration.

This is the spirit that animates TradFest, the desire to bring tradition to the fore for people to rediscover and make it their own: From workshops and walking tours to musical evenings discovering the story behind the songs, everyone is guaranteed a warm welcome.

www.tracscotland.org/festivals/tradfest

Regular Blethers readers will know that in recent years Scotland’s national storytelling, traditional music and traditional dance forums have been working together. To advance this collaboration they formed TRACS (Traditional Arts and Culture Scotland) which is based at the Scottish Storytelling Centre.

As part of Creative Scotland’s recent re-organisation of regular funding, TRACS has received three year development funding, and will carry forward the work of its networks across Scotland in partnership with the vibrant showcase and festival programmes at the Scottish Storytelling Centre.

Things have already got off to a flying start with a series of consultative days on Inter-generational work, community gardening, Intangible Cultural Heritage, the Arts of Memory in Later life, community song, storytelling development, and the annual Trad Talk conference. Ideas are buzzing and people in Scotland seem ready to meet the opportunities and challenges of change.

Thanks to everyone who has championed the arts of tradition as part of our vibrant contemporary culture. Now it’s full steam ahead.
Lux Perpetua

A star for a cradle
Sun for plough and net
A fire for old stories
A candle for the dead

Lux perpetua
By such glimmers we seek you.

George Mackay Brown

The six months since the last issue of Blethers have been saddened by the loss of two stalwarts of the Scottish Storytelling Community, **Sheila Stewart** and **Andy Hunter**. We would like to remember them here with a few thoughts and fond memories.

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**SHEILA STEWART**

Every summer Scotland’s Travelling Folk took to the roads, and all roads led to the berry fields of Blairgowrie and surrounding towns. Families went to their favourite sites to meet with relatives and friends. Summers were fruitful, happy and packed with Travelling culture, singing and storytelling. It was within that atmosphere, in the early 1960s, that the music of my mate Sheila Stewart, her mother Belle, father Alex and sister Cathie would be discovered by Hamish Henderson.

Sheila and I were both part of the broth that was made up of thousands of berry pickers. When the berry times changed and we were no longer needed by the farmers, I got on with the journey of life as Sheila picked up the reins of her late mother and sister to sing alone. Nothing equaled bringing 'the song' to those who respected the music of the Travelling Folk and Sheila did it with her conyach (heart) to the fore.

16 years ago my husband and I went to a concert in memory of Belle. Sheila and I spoke for hours, and from then on we became close friends. 'You must sing Jess' she ordered me one day. 'Aye and you have to write a biography' I told her. So together we wrote our books and sang our songs, sharing many stages and many happy years together.

During her career Sheila sang for the Royal Family, USA President Gerald Ford, the late Pope John Paul II and countless masses. I have heard her sing to one person with the same passion as she honoured a thousand.

One night, after a concert in England, a Gypsy lady approached us, not pleased that Sheila had sang in cant. 'That's our tongue and should only be spoken amongst ourselves.' Sheila smiled then said: ‘my friend I am a walking book of culture, and when I die what goes into the grave will be an empty shell because I'll share it with the world. Nothing this rich should be hidden.'

At Bannockburn library on 18th September 2014 Sheila and I shared stage for the final time. With her usual flair she told the audience that she was only there to honour her distant cousin, Robert the Bruce.

On December 9th 2014 she left us to join her family, the Stewarts of Blair. Farewell my sister, Queen of the Conyach. Your music lives on.

Jess Smith
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I always tried to attend the Guid Crack Club before Christmas in order to get a good story from Andy, which I could then tell in church and schools. He was always generous in sharing some of the most wonderful stories.

_Russell McLarty_

I will always remember Andy as a generous, kind, gentle soul with a glint of mischief about his eyes. He loved to cycle the wild ways of Scotland and one of his journeys, three years ago, brought him to Aberfeldy. At that time I was setting off with trepidation and great anxiety on my Highland Perthshire Travelling Tales bike ride and it was Andy, alongside my partner Robin, who joined me that first night at Loch Tummel to give support and offer encouragement to carry me westwards.

And I pedalled slowly through the most beautiful landscape, struggling uphill near Schiehallion, I began to understand why Andy was so drawn to journeying through these wild places on his bike. To meander along ways past ancient pines and stop to rest when rest needed and breathe the air of loch, stone and peaty earth, to experience the unfolding landscape slowly and begin to connect to the stories held within those places, that is a pilgrimage to the land where stories grow.

Thank you Andy and bless you.

_Claire Hewitt_

My abiding memory of Andy is one night at the Guid Crack Club. He announced that he was going to tell the story of Sleeping Beauty, by way of celebrating his daughter Jacinta’s 16th birthday. Whether Jacinta was there that night or not I don’t recall, but he was a very proud father I can tell you. And so he proceeded to tell the story of Sleeping Beauty in that slow, deliberate, powerful style of his. We know that great storytellers can take us into magical realms, and Andy was one of those, a great storyteller. He was a master of what I could call the wisdom story, or the parable, but he could also be very droll and wry in his funny tales.

_James Spence_

Andy was always a friendly face in a crowd, cheerful and easy going, a kind and truly gentle man. He will be greatly missed, but not forgotten.

_Mary Kenny_

Andy was without doubt a true gentleman in every sense of the word. A gentle presence in the room, and a kind face in the crowd. He was a diplomatic contributor as a member of the Scottish Storytelling Forum and a quiet powerhouse in the many roles he played. He was an excellent storyteller, modest, humorous, and supportive of others. I will miss him immeasurably as I am sure everyone who knew him will.

_Marion Kenny_

It was a warm night of early September. We were all enjoying a storywalk through the beautiful streets of Florence, led by young Italian storytellers whose energy and passion for bringing stories to life was truly overwhelming.

At the end of the walk we were standing in front of the Chiesa di Orsanmichele and it was then that Andy asked if he could also contribute a story. It was a brief anecdote about the Rucellai family and how they became very rich thanks to a curious discovery on how to dye the wool purple. He told the story entirely in Italian. I remember I was quite intrigued: he had been learning Italian only for a couple of months, and yet he had researched an old Italian story and then he was sharing it with a young Italian audience in the heart of Florence, with enthusiasm and yet with modesty. That night will always bring back a vivid memory of a great and inspiring person. Ciao, Andy.

_Annalisa Salis_

When Andy heard I was putting together a new story club in Ayr, he was one of the first to say he would be a guest. Once it was up and running he did indeed come across the country, refusing expenses, arriving of course by bicycle and entertaining us with gentle and profound wisdom. If Andy made a gesture, he would always follow it through with sincere action. Andy was an authentic and modest being, and it was a privilege to have met him and worked with him.

_Rosie Mapplebeck_

This is only a selection of all the memories contributed about Andy.
E is for Ears and Eyes

THE EARS
LISTENING FOR LOVE

'The first duty of love is to listen.'
Paul Tillich

When someone comes to me for story coaching for the first time, we begin by sitting in silence. Attune your ears, I say, to those far-away sounds outside - sounds of traffic; the cawing of a crow; muffled voices of children in a nearby park. Then, focus on sounds outside the room - a car driving by the house; a neighbour hammering next door; the sound of the washing machine in another room. Now, bring your attention inside the room - a ticking clock; the creaking of my chair; the rattle of a radiator. And finally, we focus on sounds within one's own body - a gurgling stomach; the slow pant of breath; the thumping of one's own heartbeat.

The ears are crucial to storytelling. Storytellers need attentive listeners; and listeners need storytellers attentive to sound. Many storytellers begin their sessions with call and response exercises. 'Cric' shouts the storyteller, 'Crac' replies the audience, as just one example of connecting through sound, focusing the attention and attuning ears to the story that's about to begin.

When our ears are attuned to the space in which we are telling, we can become sensitive to nuances of mood and atmosphere in the room. We can modify our telling accordingly, ensuring that we remain connected to the audience. And while unexpected sounds can be sources of distraction, an alert, attuned storyteller can often incorporate such sounds into the story. A sudden sneeze, cough, or clap of thunder might be a gift, if received graciously.

Spread your eye contact about the room as you tell your story. Be aware of people off to the sides, at the back of the room and even behind you if necessary.

Your gaze is not only your lifeline to the audience, but to higher realms. An old mentor of mine once told me that by looking up, we are looking to the 'angels'. Up is the place of inspiration. Similarly, a Native-American friend and fellow storyteller told me that up is 'where the spirits and ancestors are . . . just above your head.' He went on to explain how the spirits and ancestors love stories, so if you're stuck, look up to them for help.

Of course, there will be times when you choose to look down – to convey despair, for example – as long as you do so with intention. And there will be moments when closing your eyes can convey a dramatic moment of introspection and heighten a silent moment.

The ears and eyes are a storyteller's essential organs of perception and connection with the audience, with the space, with the language of the story, and the story characters. Be attentive to sound and sight, and your ears and eyes will help you bring heart and soul to your storytelling.

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Enter the Fool

Last year I spent a great deal of time acting like a Fool, and I do not mean all the times when I unintentionally did things that others thought were ridiculous. I mean I've been actively learning how to be a real Fool, like the one on the image of the Tarot card where you see a jester confidently striding without looking where he's going, gazing at the clouds, one foot on the ground, the other about to step over the precipice into the unknown, a look of self-assured happiness on his face.

Angela Halvorsen Bogo, a UK storyteller now living in Norway, regularly runs a series of weekend workshops in Edinburgh: The Path of The Fool Project. I had known instinctively for a couple of years that I should attend this, and last year I finally took the plunge. I was looking for something that would develop my consciousness as a storyteller, more understanding of how I work and most importantly, how to be more light-hearted and easy.

Each of the weekends was very different, and the amount of work and play that we experienced was huge and very detailed. We danced, meditated, played games, talked to strangers, journalled, drew and thought a lot. We learned how to walk like a Fool, with presence, awareness, pace and connection. We were listening, looking for the game within the game, we were clowns. In this I found something that made sense to me. I wasn't asked to do anything I wouldn't or couldn't do but I did push my boundaries, stretched my abilities and was made to look inward and reflect on my needs. I used my voice in a way I had never done before, never dared to look for. I took what was unconscious and made it conscious. I stepped forward into authenticity and openness; and then my goals changed. I wasn't who I thought I was after all, and my needs were very different.

When I first discovered the craft of storytelling I had a strong sense that I wasn't just telling stories but I was the bearer of a tradition and knowledge. The first traditional stories I read as an adult were from the book *Women Who Run with the Wolves* by Clarissa Pinkola Estes. It was a mind-expanding and life changing experience for me, and it was from that moment that I wanted to be a storyteller.

But how could I do that? How could I carry these huge stories that have been told through the ages and do them justice? How do I bring myself to them and make them my own?

Enter the Fool. I had always been quite wary of the clown, I never understood what it was all about. Then one day I saw an incredibly moving performance as part of a disability awareness training and I realised that a clown was so much more than just fooling around.

The Path of the Fool has released my inner Foolishness. It made me brave; I accessed areas of my psyche, my voice and my body that had lain dormant for a long time. I learned how to laugh and cry in a deeper way, I rediscovered the impish child that wants to play and doesn't care who is watching. I threw caution to the wind and embraced my needs, and I did so by observing closely the behaviour of others and noticing in what way it may reflect my own. I worked to become a mirror but with my own reflection in it. I think over the last few years I had lost some confidence, maybe become a little stiff, a little set in my ways. Since participating in the project I've been more adventurous and been saying YES to a lot more; re-writing some of the 'rules'. So I did perform, and told *A Journey Through Love*, and there are still more journeys to tell. And I wonder what shape they may take.

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More info on the 2015 Path of the Fool Project on www.thefoolstory.com
In Defence of Professional Storytelling

Recently I stumbled upon a tweet from a conference in Edinburgh which proclaimed ‘I hate the idea of professional storytellers.’ Instead of succumbing to my basest instincts and tweeting back ‘I hate the idea of ur face’ I stopped to think. After all, this wasn't some random, it was someone I've met and respect for their work in academic outreach. And it wasn't the first time I'd come across a similar attitude, though never expressed quite so succinctly (Twitter is good for bluntness).

Storytelling, as a word, is applied to everything these days, from novels to business strategies. Put a video on your website and you can call yourself a digital storyteller. Even when by storyteller we mean someone who is in the same physical location as their audience and uses voices, hands or other means of non-technological communication to say something meaningful (this doesn't mean it has to be noble myths - meaningful is in the experience), we are still leaving the door quite open. Storytelling is not something which is easily defined - the line between 'being a storyteller', recounting anecdotes, and pointlessly blethering is often very uncertain.

So, with storytelling being so hard to define, so much part of everyone's life at one point or another, how can we say that some people are professionals? Shouldn't we leave this experience as open to everyone as possible? Shouldn't we be encouraging everyone to embrace what they can do themselves? I passionately believe that we should.

We need unprofessional voices because no one is born at professional standard - and if you think you were, you're probably really annoying - but also because many unprofessional voices have stories well worth listening to. We need unprofessional storytelling and storytellers, and we need to listen to them. It could be said that the entire network of human relationships is held together by these.

So why should we respect an art practised in every pub and bus stop? My old pal Antonio Gramsci’s definition of ‘professional’ intellectuals comes in handy here. Every human being is capable of independent, original thought, though not all of their thoughts are valued equally by those who put themselves in a position to give out value. Though all people are intellectuals, not everyone's function in society is that of an intellectual. Thus, while all people are intellectuals, not everyone's function in society is that of an intellectual. Thus, while everyone makes their own tea or sews on a button from time to time, not all people are considered to be professional chefs or tailors.

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So just as we need professional chefs for the day we want to learn how to cook a new fancy dish, and professional tailors for the day we need to mend a particularly nasty rip, we also need professional storytellers for the day we want to learn new stories, or the day we need to take storytelling to particularly vulnerable and difficult groups such as older people with dementia, problematic teenagers or children with severe disabilities. And we also need professional storytellers for the day we want to be inspired, awed and delighted by the art of someone who has spent considerable time honing their storytelling skills and has become a professional. A time, incidentally, that they have not spent learning how to dazzle you with an exotic dish or fancy needlework.

So why is this professionalism not more widely recognised? The main difference between storytelling and other arts is that storytelling is seen as something you can do without much education or practice, something you grow out of as you grow up. Folk tales are still seen as 'less' than literary, the spoken is still seen as worth less than the written, and the colloquial as less than the intellectual.

Storytelling as a discipline is currently emerging into the public view, and is open to criticism from both devotees and detractors when people try to drag the ugly matter of money into the beautiful world of art or tradition. A recent article about performance poetry discussed the common feeling that if you truly love something, you should do it, no matter whether you get paid, and that people who insist on decent remuneration are shallow and self-absorbed. Well, try that with your plumber next time they whistle away while fixing your kitchen sink.

Furthermore, money (like it or not) is how this society shows it values people's time and work, so for as long as people feel that storytelling should be voluntary and are not willing to pay for it, they will not value it as a 'fully fledged' art. And for as long as they don't, they are not likely to start paying for it, creating a vicious circle around the matter of money and professionalism.

For as long as we have any sort of cultural activity within a capitalist economy, it's hard to see how these awkward issues can be solved. People need to live, and it takes time and work to tell stories often and well. Hearing stories often and well has a tendency to improve people's quality of life. If you think is right to treat as a professional a musician or stand-up comedian who has worked at their craft, consider - why not a storyteller?

My point is not that we should 'professionalise storytelling' in that we should create new rules for how to do it and smooth out the rough edges of the tradition. If that was what I thought this was about, I'd be on the hate train too. My point is about re-drawing the boundaries of what we think 'work' is and what we think 'value' is in monetary and non-monetary terms (while we're here, money is a communal fiction, no more real than magic beans but a lot more dangerous.) There is a much, much wider conversation which needs to be had about work and value, preferably in parliament, preferably right now. In the most general terms, this economy needs to stop turning everything which isn't City Business into a hobby for those privileged enough not to need to be paid properly for what they do (see also: heritage). In terms of the place of storytelling within the other arts, people need to start thinking about whether they'd hold a professional painter or writer in the same disregard they hold someone who tells stories for a living, and why they think that's okay.

And how do we make sure – in this world where someone's always holding the purse strings, where a group of people with certain tastes decide who can be considered a professional – that we remain open to hearing new voices, that we don't become a self-serving hegemonic elite? Well, we have to pay attention. As do the listeners. The only way there is to keep any professional group in check, fulfilling their societal function, is for the masses to be snapping at their heels. (But please, throw things at the politicians first - they've done more to deserve it lately. Then Damien Hirst, and if you've got any eggs left after that I'll be ready for you.)

And, a final aside - in case you're reading this defence of storytellers' pay with the impression that the state is throwing vast amounts of money at anyone with a book of Jack tales and an inflated opinion of themselves, allow me to disavow you of that notion. Even the people who've been raised with generations of stories, who can turn your worldview upside down with a well-placed phrase and give you images that will stay with you for years, still have day jobs.

In case you're reading this, Creative Scotland, lend us a tenner. Just to tide us over 'til the revolution.

Erin Farley
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'TAll men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals. Thus, because it can happen that everyone at some time fries a couple of eggs or sews up a tear in a jacket, we do not necessarily say that everyone is a cook or a tailor.'

Antonio Gramsci -
The Prison Notebooks
The Kitchen Ceilidh

We were nearing the end of a long trip to the US and Canada, and we had just finished a gig in the Fire Hall at Indian Creek in the part of Cape Breton known as the North Shore. We had stayed around to chat after the gig, and as we approached the farmhouse where we were being put up, we could tell that things were already in full swing.

There was music playing as we walked in to the large, open kitchen. In the centre of it all there was a long streak of a fellow sat on a high stool, his feet planted on the floor, and he was attacking that fiddle. He sat there with a look of immense concentration his face, gouging the tunes out of the instrument, blonde hair flopping over his pale face, the lines starting to draw themselves deeper. This was Paul Cranford, collector, publisher, author and renowned expert on Cape Breton fiddle. He knew thousands of tunes, the names of all the tunes he played and where you could find them.

Also present were Tommy Basker on what they call the tin sandwich (and we call the moothie) and Paul Macdonald, another walking encyclopaedia of tunes, playing some tasty chords and runs on the guitar. There were a couple of surprise guests too. As we were packing up after the gig we had been amazed when two iconic figures in Scottish traditional music had walked in the door, saying ‘we heard there was some music but it looks like we've missed it.’ Norman Kennedy and Margaret Bennett - now this was unexpected! Well, we said, there's a bit of a gathering down the road, and we're sure you'd be more than welcome. And here they were, Norman giving out 'The Braes o Balquhidder' with beautiful decoration and a freedom that only comes from the absolute masters of their craft, Margaret in a couple of songs restoring a little bit of Gaelic to a place where it is not heard as much as it once was.

After one particularly riotous set of tunes Cranford turned to me and said, 'And every one of those comes from your country!' Whatever the argument about the 'authenticity' of the Cape Breton style - and it was an argument that punctuated much of the trip and much previous time besides - I had never heard Scottish tunes played with that degree of roughness and vigour, which recordings so rarely capture. Cranford even picked up a viola and slashed his way through two or three sets on that too.

All that music and step-dancing on the hard kitchen floor, songs, jokes and good-natured jibes, unexpected guests, food to share, gossip and tall tales. A proper ceilidh in other words. This all happened about twenty years ago, and I've never forgotten it. Like all the best ceilidhs this one had been visited by what Hamish Henderson called the 'folk goddess', whose job it is to 'concentrate and develop the collective joy of social groups and who can, even in educated societies, overwhelm with her collective goodness.' This is the value of what we call the traditional arts. We cherish, foster, encourage and perform them, not just for their own sake, but for the contribution they make to our well-being through the conjuring of that collective joy. The kitchen ceilidh - an emblem of what's possible.

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EdinBal: Western European Ceilidhs in Scotland

In the late summer of 2013 I came back from yet another brilliant bal folk festival on the continent where I had been with a group of Edinburgh-based friends. We simply couldn’t wait for another year to get our dancing fix so we decided to bring bal folk with us, and EdinBal was born.

Bal folk is a very broad term that encompasses a mixture of Western European dances and dance styles that centre around a core traditional French repertoire that was created and made popular in France during the folk revival of the sixties. Amongst the standard repertoire, we find old French rural dances like the bourrée, pan-European dances such as the waltz, and dances imported from abroad such as the circassian circle. An interesting case is the Scottish, which is the simplified continental version of the highland scottish, originating from Scotland.

Nowadays bal folk dances are danced all over Western Europe, from the Netherlands to Portugal, from France to the Czech Republic. All countries add some of the local dances and styles to the core repertoire, for instance in Italy you will also find Italian traditional dances from various regions. In Belgium, on the other hand, the repertoire is very standard, but the music and the dances are usually slower and smoother than in France.

In all cases, the idea is the same: dancing social dances in an informal, open and relaxed atmosphere while listening to great music. Here in Scotland bal folk fits in very well with the ceilidh tradition, and in fact many of the core EdinBal people met through a local Scottish country dance society. And all of the very successful bals that the society has organised so far have seen a mixture of bal folk and ceilidh.

All bal folk dances are simple enough that everybody can learn them quickly, but with room for complexity so that experienced dancers don’t become bored. In contrast to ceilidh dances, bal folk dances are almost never called. People usually pick them up on the spot or attend a short dance workshop (like the regular workshops EdinBal organises). This means that there are almost no interruptions to the dancing: at the end of a tune, the band introduces the next dance and then immediately starts to play.

The other main difference with ceilidh dances is that there is a much higher percentage of couple dances in bal folk. Here you will find people improvising a lot, so much so that sometimes it seems that no two couples on the dance floor are dancing the same dance! The lack of calling suppress the idea of doing a dance 'right' or 'wrong'; instead, people build on what they know of the dance and give their own interpretation. Of course the group dances (usually mixers and a few set dances) do require a certain degree of consensus on the steps!

Since Edinburgh is such a multi-cultural city, it wasn’t difficult to find enough enthusiastic people from various cultural backgrounds who were willing to teach a few workshops or to play a few tunes, so EdinBal is able to organise regular events, dance workshops and music sessions. Everything is run by volunteers and friends drawn together by a common passion and the desire for people to have an amazing time at our events. So why not come and try this out yourself!

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More information on
www.edinbal.org.uk

Are you dancing yet?

Dance has always been a feature of Scottish social events. One English commentator travelling around Scotland observed in 1804, that in the evenings Highland labourers were likely to be found dancing traditional reels, while in England, their counterparts would be more likely to be 'intoxicated and riotous' ('Traditional Dance in Scotland' by JP & TM Flett - 1964).

Other sources quoted by the Fletts, indicate that there were professional dancing teachers, known as danciers, as well as tutors leading their peers in the community since the 1770s in Scotland. Both these types of tutors enjoyed great patronage, as it was noted that 'young men and women would walk for many miles' to take part in dancing, not to mention the many miles the danciers clocked up by foot, horse, bike or car to follow their trade. Even though it may seem that the situation nowadays has changed remarkably from those times, Scotland’s historic love of dance means that there is a foundation that we are able to continue building on. To this day there is still an expectation that most people will have some passing knowledge of a ceilidh dance or two at the very least - which is a better situation than in many other countries.

It’s very important that we keep the love of dance alive in Scotland; dance is one of the top things that makes you feel good - as our predecessors probably knew very well - and it enhances the wellbeing of people and communities. Recent research by the University of Cumbria has revealed that Scottish country dancing is beneficial to our health and can help to delay the ageing process. So... are you dancing yet?

Fiona Campbell
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The Rescue of the Son of Fionn

We were sitting in the kitchen of my grandmother’s old croft house, on a cold dark winter’s evening. The only light was provided by the peat fire and a rather smoky paraffin lamp, silence lay on the room as my two grand uncles and my grand aunt sat quietly after their meal as was their custom. I cracked the silent peace by asking a question. ‘Why’ I said, ‘did Black Duncan and Sorley say that the mermaids of Ardnamurchan Point are the most beautiful but most evil in the world?’

After a second or two my grand aunt Flora said: ‘That’s because they are, but they aren’t really mermaids.’ My grand uncle John cleared his throat and stroked his long white beard. Then spoke out: ‘It came about this way and you are as well to know it from us, for it is a family story.

‘A son of Fionn was captured by the Lochlannaich’ he began. Then went on to describe how Fionn, who was unable to find a solution, thought of asking for the aid of the Old Grey Magician, and how the Magician appeared as soon as Fionn thought of him. The Old Grey Magician agreed to take on the task of saving the son of Fionn, and he flew as a bird to the court of Manannan, God of the Sea, to get from him the use of his mantle of invisibility and forgetfulness, but to do this he had to do a task for Manannan.

Fionn also sent Comhnaal Beul Airgod (Conval of the Silver Tongue) to negotiate with the Lochlannaich to buy the time needed to carry out the rescue. Conval tricked the Lochlannaich so that all they got was the land between high and low water around the point of Ardnamurchan. So they lived on that land like mermaids and mermen. Auntie Flora had put in bits and pieces and at the end said: ‘that is why they aren’t really mermaids, they are descendants of the Lochlannaich with all their evil ways.’

This was in 1940 or 41 and I liked the story and tried to get more detail of how it was all done, where the Old Grey Magician had gone to and what powers he used, but my uncle seemed to be unwilling to go into detail and died not long after telling what he wanted of the story, and my aunt was not for telling more. Yet I felt there was more to be told.

I tried indirectly to get more about the mermaids from one or two other storytellers in Ardnamurchan, but had no luck.

Then in 1947 I was having a ceilidh in the house of a cousin of my father. A man in his eighties and a friend of his of a similar age were there, and the two of them were a great contrast. Niall was tall and well built, an ex-soldier who had served in the Boer War and the 1st World War and had a rather stern look to him. Lachie was a small and light-built ex-sailor, full of fun and always with a smile. He also claimed to have been a ‘genuine flyweight boxer’ and by his face he may have been.

During the ceilidh the talk turned to the mermaids of Ardnamurchan and Niall asked if I knew how they were connected with Skye. I said I had heard of them but didn’t know much of any Skye connection but my aunt had said they weren’t real mermaids. This set them off on a combined telling of how the Old Grey Magician had gone from Skye to save one of the Fianna who had been captured by the Lochlannaich and Niall gave great detail of the ceremonies carried out by the Old Grey Magician and how he travelled to Elian Mhannain to get the mantle of Manannan, but to get it he had to do a task for Manannan and save his son Honi, God of seaweed. Lachie came in with bits and pieces but took over when it came to the Old Grey Magician calling on the Blue Men of the Minch and travelling below the sea. Both of them agreed that Conval of the Silver Tongue had tricked the Lochlannaich into just getting the land between high and low water around the point of Ardnamurchan, and that the mermaids of Ardnamurchan were the most beautiful and most evil in the world.

They both reckoned that this was a Skye story with very little connection to Ardnamurchan. Though Niall did ask Lachie if he had in fact met up with the mermaids while he was at sea and if that was the reason he was an old bachelor, because of the fright they gave him. Lachie just laughed and said it was more like yourself got the fright, Niall.

After hearing the various versions of the story, I started to compare the similarities and the differences and how they fitted together to make a complete rounded story, without cutting out or changing important facts and details. The stories did indeed combine pretty seamlessly so that stories from different parts of my family became again one as they had been originally.

In 1954 I met up with a storyteller from the Isle of Man (a native Manx speaker) and he had a story of the Old Grey Magician getting a loan of the mantle of Manannan but to get it he had to bring the cup of healing to Manannan. He did not connect the story with Ardnamurchan but claimed the Old Grey Magician lived in Skye and flew to the Isle of Man as a Great seabird. He also mentioned the great magic powers of the Old Grey Magician but did not know of the rituals for invoking them. Putting it all together I felt I had arrived at a story which was very true to the original. And as I had been given it as a family story in the beginning, I never told it outside the family until the 2nd of November 2014 when I told it in the Netherbow theatre along with Kati Waitzman.

A full written version is due to be published in the coming months.

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A key aspect of my role as Scottish Book Trust Reader in Residence for Dumfries and Galloway Libraries has been the piloting of Jack and Lily Storytime Clubs. This has involved training, mentoring and supporting library staff, local children's authors, teachers and children in storytelling skills. The aim was to bring books to a fuller life and impact through a more confident use of oral skills and actions and everyday objects. In short, we have been reconnecting with the innate ability we all have to tell stories and reigniting our lost sense of wonder and play.

The clubs run in four to six week blocks with a general theme. Each one hour session focusses on a picture book and an oral participative story, which are explored through a variety of crafts and activities. A child is then chosen to re-tell the oral story the following week.

A number of very useful resources are employed along the way, including Storysacks, Storyboxes, puppets, props and parachutes. For those who may yet be unfamiliar with these, Storysacks contain a specific book along with board games, puppets and other activities to enhance the experience of the book. Storyboxes are broadly themed and contain puppets, props and dress-ups and an easy to use handbook of suggested stories and ways to tell them. Storysacks and boxes make for easy session planning and they are ideal tools for building confidence in budding storytellers as they are self-contained, ready to use and require just a pinch of imagination. They are often available in libraries to teachers, tellers and other interested parties upon request. Often people are not clear on how to get the most out of them though, and simply read the book instead of engaging the children fully through the use of the objects.

Parachutes, for example, are an ideal tool for storytelling. They come in a variety of sizes and can be used as effectively indoors as outdoors. For our winter theme we made a snow storm by shaking cotton wool balls into the air then threw these ‘snowballs’ at each other; we made paper snowflakes with glitter and glue, set them on top of the parachute and gazed at them quietly with a torch from underneath; we made felt mittens, scrambled them on the parachute and matched them up again and put the children and their mittens in the washing machine (on top of the chute) and shook the chute around them.

As skills are practiced, confidence grows and creativity is unleashed. Sessions are planned from scratch and new methods and resources added to the mix. One week, we used Snowballs by Lois Elhert as our picture book: everyday objects like buttons, hats, seeds, toy wheels and shoe laces were used to decorate a family of snow people and their pets. We made our own version of these using snow heads, middles and bottoms made from large circles of white fabric and decorated them with buttons, baubles, hats, mittens, scarves and carrots. The children loved having their photos taken with their snow people before they melted back into the bags from which they had come.

Puppets and stuffed toys were also in regular attendance. Jack and Lily welcomed the children every week and became much loved members of the club. Bobbin Robin told jokes, Moth the Elf introduced a whole array of woodland friends who were then spotted gleefully in The Mitten by Jan Brett.

So if you have not yet considered how the use of Storysacks, Storyboxes, parachutes, puppets or props might enhance your storytelling sessions, I recommend that you do so, the possibilities are endless.

It is a pure delight to witness new storytellers developing across the generations. Long live libraries and the stories that we live in them!

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You can find practical ideas on how to use Storysacks here: www.tracscotland.org/tracs/resources/storysacks
The Trail is a reissue of a classic guide to Scotland's older lore, closely connected with the landscape. That leads on to The Traveller's Guide's detailed survey of sites and stones in every region. This represents many years of travel and study and is packed with attractive photographs.

On a different note, Aye Singin an Spinnin Yarns is a distillation of the life and crack of Nell Hannah who was brought up in Turriff but spent much of her working life at the Stanley Mill in Perthshire. Nell is in conversation with Margaret Bennett and Doris Rougvie as she maintains an invincible love of life through hard work and sometimes hardship. A big-hearted and humorous lady!

Among many other recent books, space allows mention of Lari Don's Winter's Tales which is a very enjoyable and useful collection of winter stories from around the world. Floris Books have launched their new series of Traditional Tales picture books with Janis Mackay's The Selkie, Lari Don's Tam Lin, and Theresa Breslin's The Stoorworm. These are excellent additions to the growing range of illustrated books bringing together the cream of Scotland's storytellers and illustrators.

Finally, Millie Gray, storyteller extraordinaire of Leith has added a sixth volume to her epic romance of twentieth century life and times back to full-throated life. When Sorry is Not Enough continues the adventures of Sally Stuart in the post-war years, with Millie’s characteristic mix of humour and compassion.

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Book Blethers

As the Storytelling Centre embraces all of Scotland's arts of tradition, it is interesting to see how storytelling as an artform is reaching out in so many directions, old and new. Paraig MacNeil's De Moray (available on Kindle) is an epic poem of 2,000 lines, recited from memory in the older bardic style. It follows the campaign of Sir Andrew de Moray during the war for Scottish freedom, and is laced with Celtic philosophy, pride of ancestry, and a passion for cultural identity. The poem is available in traditional Scots and English. To a degree Moray is a forgotten hero and his death at Stirling Bridge a huge blow to the Scottish cause, and his death at Stirling Bridge a degree Moray is a forgotten hero.

Tradition Bearer of Edinburgh's Old Town. John is accompanied on a tour from Edinburgh Castle to Holyrood, interspersing his unique storytelling as an artform with dry wit, digressions and some pithy advice. This book is a labour of love and it aims to capture the essence of the man and passes on his legacy to future generations.

Much wider in geographical scope are Stuart McHardy's On the Trail of Scotland's Myths and Legends and The Traveller's Guide to Sacred Scotland by Marianna Lines.