Once Upon a Story

Folktales of Europe

Fairy tales are much more than children’s bed time stories. They are fragments of wisdom entwined with the oldest layers of our culture and the deepest recesses of the human psyche. They can be fabulous and bizarre, and contain plenty of dark magic, spiritual enlightenment and shafts of wit. This year’s Scottish International Storytelling Festival delves into the dark and dangerous world of European fairy and folk tale to celebrate the bicentenary of the first collection of stories by the Brothers Grimm.

The Festival will welcome a record 100 participating artists from Germany, Norway, Ireland, Poland, Brittany, Russia and Italy as well as Scotland, and despite being based in the capital, it will reach all parts of the country through its Festival on Tour programme. From Ayrshire to Aberdeen, from Iona to Orkney, the magic of stories will span the width and breadth of Scotland. In Glasgow the Festival is proud to announce a new partnership with Scottish Youth Theatre, bringing a week of fantastic raconteur events to Glasgow residents at The Old Sheriff Court.

But this year’s Festival aims to include everyone by bridging not only geographical distances but also age differences. The ever popular Tell-a-Story Day campaign partners with Luminate: Scotland’s Creative Ageing Festival around the theme Old and Young to reclaim the link between generations through story and memory.

This coming October leave the winter out, and welcome in the music and stories that have travelled space and time to come knock on your door. With friends or family, come along and surprise yourself at the warmth of the ancient art of storytelling, and you will discover that once upon a time...

www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk

Sheila Stewart

A Lifetime of Song

It was in March this year that Sheila told us that, after almost sixty years of singing, she had decided to retire from full time performing. We felt most honoured that she had chosen her appearance at this year’s Auchtermuchty Festival to be her final public outing as a singer, as she sang at the first Festival and many times through the years.

It is hard to overestimate the influence and effect that her singing has had both at home here in Scotland and throughout the world.

Sheila was first recorded in 1953 in Blairgowrie by Hamish Henderson of the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh and Maurice Fleming, a local journalist. It was during these visits to Blair that Hamish established a life-long collaboration with the family who were to become known as ‘The Stewarts of Blair’. As a troupe The Stewarts travelled throughout the country as well as America and Canada. The line-up was Belle and Alex (mother and father) and daughters Cathy and Sheila.

Sheila was the youngest in the group and even in that company her singing stood out as being something special. When she takes on the older songs in her repertoire and especially the big ballads, ‘The Muckle Sangs’, such as The Twa Brithers or Mill o’ Tiftie’s Annie, you get swept up in the action of the story and her voice has the ability to let you hear these songs as they would have sounded centuries ago.

Sheila has also gained quite a reputation as a storyteller, again a legacy handed down through her travelling background. She has passed on a great deal of songs and stories and it would be wrong to think of this as the end of an era. A legion of younger singers have learned from her not only the songs, but also more importantly the way of singing them with conviction - the coynach.

Thanks Sheila, we all owe you a large debt of gratitude.

Jimmy Hutchison

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**A warm welcome to storytellers new to the Scottish Storytelling Centre Directory**

**Wendy de Rusett**
I first met Wendy de Rusett, who suddenly died on June 14 2012, when she lived across the road from us in West End Glasgow 25 years ago. She was then an artist and Scott music enthusiast, but a couple of years later she moved to her ancestral North East homeland in Findochty, and became an unassuming but highly inventive and inspirational storytelling ‘drama wife’ in schools all across the area. She would write plays and songs for and with the children, and make puppets with them. When I needed two vast Loch Sea Monsters to take to the Uralis city of Penn, Wendy and her team of Findochty kids quickly constructed them from recycled materials. She was a devoted attender and activist at storytelling and traditional song festivals across the country. She will be sorely missed - Ewan McVicar

**Elly Crichton Stuart**
Elly tells stories of adventure, stories of courage, earth tales and true stories about how each one of us can make a difference. She is a warm and humorous storyteller who draws her audience into the drama of the story, infusing tales with quirky characters and often taking people of all ages on an interactive journey into the imagination. Her passion is to give children, young people and adults the confidence to tell and to write their own stories. Elly was born and brought up in the beautiful village of Falkland in Fife; her inspiration comes from nature and from her Irish grandmother who told her true stories about the connection between animals and humans.

**Jane Mather**
Jane loves telling stories, from traditional Scottish folk tales to simple fairy stories and has experience telling stories to children and families in school and community settings and adult community groups. Jane began telling for a friendship project at her children’s nursery and things grew from there. She gained a forest school qualification and recently developed nature kindergarten sessions for her children’s school, which encourage plenty of imaginative exploration and support the curriculum for excellence. Currently Jane runs SEASONS, a wellbeing project in Edinburgh which facilitates a range of creative and therapeutic activities for people experiencing mental ill health.

**Fong Liu**
Fong Liu’s storytelling experience started 25 years ago, while she was at secondary school in China, when she won both her school’s and the Changshu Storytelling Festival’s storytelling competitions. After studying Chinese language and literature at Suzhou University she spent a brief period as an advertisement designer before launching her storytelling career. In 2010 she made her English language storytelling debut at the Scottish International Storytelling Festival. Fong Liu’s style is unique and mixes Chinese traditions and western drama elements, with songs always playing an important role. Most of her stories are Chinese traditional legends, adapted to suit different audiences.

**Tanya Milligan**
The stories that Tanya tells are a mixture of traditional tales she heard as a child, stories of her own creation and tales that she and her audiences create together. As a professional librarian, Tanya has worked in both schools and public libraries for many years. She enjoys collaborative work and has a breadth of experience working with professionals in many disciplines. From libraries to urban wildlife centres, in hospitals and art galleries, for parties, playgroups and nurseries and to audiences of all ages, Tanya is always looking for more and different ways to enhance people’s lives with stories.

**Ewan McVicar**
Support Your Local Stories

Once upon a time I asked Alec Weir, an acquaintance in Barrhead, what was the best job he had ever had. He instantly threw me a long tale of dance bands, a council flat, an Arabian prince, that man from Last of the Summer Wine, cat’s whiskers, the enamelling of baths, and how to fly without navigation (in wartime in the Arctic ... and he was the navigator).

It was many years later when I read over the transcription, checked the improbabilities, found that they were all true (Peter Sallis had taught him radio navigation) that I realised that all his weird juxtapositions had been crafted by a natural storyteller. He had even landed his craft right where he had started, by answering my question.

Looking back on it, I now see some useful lessons in Alec’s narrative. Firstly never assume you’re the best storyteller in the room, and secondly get inside the story, not just the joints, peaks, troughs and punch-lines, but the facts and the meanings. Trace the intentions of the teller who has passed it on to you. Like most storytellers I’m tempted to ‘pimp up’ the material to get an extra laugh or a tear, but when that happens I follow up with some background, the authentic stuff. Most of the stories we tell are, after all, not ours.

I’ve been collecting neglected tales in my home area, South Clydeside, for some time now. Our authentic storytelling tradition has been seriously neglected for a very long time, and there is still a preference for ‘zombified’ (neither living nor dead) Victorian versions of local tales. The result so far is a collection of fifty or so tales, genuine folk material with a smattering of urban myths, japes, scams and tragedies at home and at work.

From Inverclyde we have the tale of the fairy ring and the fierce defence the fairies made of it; the death-dealing and satan-worshiping troll; a noble lady whose thirst for blood won her a castle, which she never left.

In Renfrewshire there are stories of a false kirk inside a hill, designed to draw late churchgoers into the arms of Satan; the shape-shifting housewife who spent her spare time living as a hare; Aim-Teeth Jenny who lived in a loch; a 10th-century master class in the real meaning of ‘faith’; people inside pavements; the trickster sheriff who forged himself out of jail and a number of absurd-but-scarily-true tales of modern ‘management’.

In Glasgow we find tales of the world-class scam that a bishop master-minded; an impossible bank robbery and the detective who could not reveal his name; the knight who dressed up as a fish and won a hill; the squire who went in search of a joust and faced an army; an exile’s silent story in one word; a perfect murder discovered and then covered up by the church; ghosts in the walls; the ghost who attended a storytelling session, and of course the terrible judgments visited on English stars by the audience at the Glasgow Alhambra. In East Renfrewshire there is the tale of a serial killer at the annual fair; moving corpses, missing coffins, a headless guest at the wedding (told plainly and at the wedding they were having a party up the Gateside Road and about one or two in the morning they all came down the round, dancing, and the man that played the melodeon led them.

Each one of these stories is true in one sense or another. They map a culture and mask it, too. Why not make an Old Year Resolution that goes something like this: ‘I’ll pick up some real local stories and pass them on’.


**Alan Steel**  
alan@inclusionmatters.co.uk

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**The Wedding Guest**

I won’t tell you the name, but it’s a well-known family in Barrhead. This young couple got married, the best man was very musical and played the concertina – what they called a melodeon, and the groom was a fine dancer. Then, when the First World War came, the husband went off to the army. Then the wife got a telegram, her husband had been killed at the battle of the Somme.

After the war things weren’t easy, and the wife took in a lodger, and eventually she married him. After the wedding they were having a party up the Gateside Road and about one or two in the morning they all came down the round, dancing, and the man that played the melodeon led them.

They had just got to the plantin’ beside Bert Wright’s house when a figure came out of the bushes and danced with them. Two or three of the wedding guests saw it. They said it was the first husband dancing at the wedding, all white, and he had no head.
We are all familiar with pop culture beliefs about left brain/right brain differences. The right brain is praised as the creative half of the partnership and as storytellers, we probably like to think of ourselves as right brain types. However, it’s not quite that simple.

Split-brain research shows that while the right brain feels, emotes and bubbles over with inspiration, it is the left brain that controls language and speech and pulls all this together into stories. In fact, some researchers think our ego, that me we each identify with, may simply be one long story that the left brain keeps churning out.

All these left brain/right brain insights came out of medical treatment for epilepsy. In the 1950s doctors began treating epileptics by cutting the corpus callosum, a flat piece of brain tissue that acts like a broadband cable, linking left and right hemispheres of the brain. The surgery worked, reducing the severity of seizures, apparently without side effects.

But researchers wondered why people had a corpus callosum at all, if cutting it didn’t change anything, so they began to test patients by giving different information to each side of their brain. For example researchers might show the patient’s right eye a picture while keeping it hidden from the left, or they might touch the left toe with an ice cube.

Since each side of the brain takes responsibility for the opposite half of the body, once the connection between them was severed, one hemisphere no longer knew what the other one was seeing, feeling or thinking. But thanks to our left brain, our resident storyteller and unabashed liar, the patients remained unaware that there was information missing.

Imagine showing a picture of a rainy Scottish August day to the left eye of a patient whose corpus callosum has been cut. The right side of the brain being the emotional one, it will probably begin to flood the patient with feelings of sadness.

The left side of the brain though, the part that puts experience into words, sees through the right eye so doesn’t know about the picture. But if the patient is asked why the sad face, without hesitation the left brain will come up with a plausible story, perhaps a tale about an ice cream cone that the patient dropped the day before. And just like any good storytellers must do to tell a convincing story, the left brain will believe completely in the story it is spinning. There are deep neurological reasons why the word storyteller applies both to weavers of mythic truth and to those who take liberties with every truth.

As far as I know, no one has ever tested split-brain patients by hooking each of their ears up with a different story, but maybe telling one side a tragic romance and the other a tall tale from Leith would really constitute a cruel and unusual punishment.

Still, this research shows that human beings are fundamentally made of stories. While the stories we use to make sense of our lives and communicate with others may sometimes carry profound truths, we must remember that in its drive to keep a good story going, our inner storyteller may sometimes deceive us.

Does that sound familiar?

Alette Willis
alletewillis@gmail.com

Alette Willis, PhD, is a storyteller and a research fellow at the University of Edinburgh. To date, she has never had the opportunity to play with someone else’s brain, but she’s spent several decades amusing herself with her own.

If you are looking to get creative with both sides of the brain, try Gabrielle Rico’s book Writing the Natural Way. For more about split-brain research, see Michael Gazzaniga’s works.

St Philibert and the Devil

On the evening of Friday 8th June a large audience sat in the comfortable Court at the Scottish Storytelling Centre, where a wonderful and richly coloured exhibition of paintings by Oxford/Belfast based artist Dorothy Smyth (www.ohrtobe.com) hung on the wall.

Tables were set out with candles, wine and scented flowers. The event was the premiere telling in Scotland of my tale St Philibert and the Devil, supported by a vibrant collection made possible thanks to Creative Scotland. The exhibition also included The Ordinary Extraordinary Life of John Ferguson, a collection depicting the life of a fisherman from Fife where Dorothy spent a good deal of her childhood and for which I had written a poetry collection.

The story of St Philibert and the Devil was commissioned by a private art lover for the Oxford International Women’s festival in 2006 and is set in Elizabethan Oxfordshire. It was inspired by John Clare’s poem, Nutters, about collectors of wild nuts and especially hazelnuts. The historical facts in the tale were originally gathered for a short story I submitted for a BBC historical short story competition judged by Colin Dexter (of Inspector Morse fame) where it made it to the final round.

The story is about a girl named Phil after an obscure saint, St Philibert, the Patron Saint of hazelnuts. Phil and her father are both travelling farm workers, but Phil is determined to seek her fortune.

After hearing a local woman explain how anyone with sufficient courage can gain one wish by meeting the Devil in the village church yard, Phil sets off to make her wish come true. Phil has an unusual companion in her travels, Turnspit Dog, who is more than the average dog and is in fact a boy bewitched by a demon.

Together they travel to the fascinating market town of Elizabethan Oxford. There they meet a mysterious nut vendor who persuades Phil that collecting hazelnuts can make her rich.
A Story Full of Blessings

Sunday July 1st, Canada Day, is a hot and oppressively humid day in my hometown of Hamilton, Ontario

The short walk from the parking lot to the front door of the Hamilton Continuing Care Centre (HCCC) leaves me drenched with sweat and wishing I’d stayed home in the air-conditioned comfort of my sister’s house.

I’ve come to the Centre to offer some storytelling as part of the residents’ monthly religious service. HCCC is home to 64 elderly residents requiring long-term nursing care, most suffering from dementia. For nearly a year my brother Mark has been coming the first Sunday of the month to offer an hour-long service consisting of some hymn singing, prayer and an uplifting spiritual message.

Is it by chance however that Phil meets the stranger in the heart of Wychwood Forest a few days later? Is Turnspit Dog correct in thinking the sinister man wants to harm Phil?

The evening went extremely well, and members of the audience travelled from places such as the Isle of Gigha, Glenrothes, Falkirk, Birmingham, Argyll, the Borders, New York and even Edinburgh itself to be there. The exhibition of paintings was on display for a month and was well received by the many visitors to the Centre.

This lovely opportunity has been inspirational for further art collaboration with mixed media and writing for the storytelling community. I had a small number of books self published. They are now sold out, but perhaps they may be re-issued at a later date. Till then one is resting in the Scottish Storytelling Library. Do have a keek!

Patsy Dyer
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Our arrival is unexpected due to holidays, but within fifteen minutes staff have wheeled ten elderly men and women into a room. Mark greets them by name and introduces me. A couple are able to smile and shake hands but most seem oblivious to my presence, lost in the haze of dementia. Why am I here, I wonder. How will I reach this audience?

Hymn books are handed out, we help them find the right page and hold their books and sing the first of our hymns, accompanied on piano by a woman from Mark’s church. One of the men becomes anxious and has to be taken back to his room. Several other patients appear to have fallen asleep. Silently, I fret that my storytelling and singing will fall on deaf ears.

Following his talk on encouragement, Mark introduces me as his brother and storyteller from Scotland. The word ‘Scotland’ seems to have a magical power, rousing the residents from their dozing. Their smiles encourage me. I acknowledge what a privilege it is to be among such a group of elders.

More smiles and a ‘Thank you’ from 92 years old Rose. I launch into a song: Wild Mountain Thyme (making a Scottish connection) and This Land is Your Land (in honour of Canada Day). Nearly everyone who can claps along, and a few are even singing.

Putting my guitar away, I nervously begin my story The Bundle of Blessings about a woman so burdened by her troubles and ailments that she suffers anxiety and depression. Yet, she notes that a friend also has her share of troubles yet seems to rise above them. Over coffee, the woman asks her friend how she copes. Her friend reveals that before going to bed she asks God to help carry her burdens and encourages the woman to try it.

Although doubtful, she agrees. That night she asks for God’s help and goes to sleep. She has a dream in which she enters a cave carrying her bag of troubles on her left shoulder. A beautiful maiden approaches and informs her that she can exchange her bag of troubles for another among the many that line the floor of the cave. Eager to be rid of her own, the woman chooses one, then another but discovers that all are equally weighted with troubles.

Seeing the woman’s despair, the maiden points out that the woman also carries another bag on her right shoulder. This bundle is so light that the woman has not noticed it before. She takes it down and opens it … inside are all the blessings of her life.

At that moment, I let go of my anxieties and realise the blessings here in this room - the reverent silence, the serene smiles, and the twinkling eyes of the elderly folk before me. They are transfixed by the story in the way that children are. Our hearts are open. In that moment, I know I am right where I am supposed to be, doing what I’m meant to be doing. Despite the heat, the initial confusion, and my worries about whether I will be understood and appreciated by this small elderly audience, the story lifts us, reveals its blessing and works its transformation. And on this hot July day I forget my troubles and, like the woman in the story, discover my bundle of blessings and am grateful.

Michael Williams
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www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk
Scotland's a Blether!

Here is a snapshot of some of the storytelling groups and clubs across the country. Make sure you are on the Centre’s mailing list to get monthly updates on storytelling clubs and groups in your area.

1. Highlands and Islands  – Inverness Bothy
This song and storytelling club, hosted by Brian O’headhra and George Livingstone, meets the first Thursday of each month at 8pm upstairs at La Tortilla Assesina, 99 Castle Street, Inverness. Can you tell a story, sing a traditional song, or enjoy a good ol’ ceilidh? Come along and join in the craic. Bidi mórán faite ort! Goan yersel!’! Guest performer and local artists will be performing every month, entry by donation. Contact Brian O’headhra b.oheadhra@gmail.com, 07717 224360 www.inbhirnis.com/bothan.html

2. Tayside and North Fife – Blether Tay-gither
Blether Tay-gither meets every month on the last Tuesday in The Burgh Coffee House, Dundee. Our tellers come from a wide range of backgrounds, from professional storytellers to those who just want to listen, and from students to OAPs. In the past six months or so, as well as individual storytelling projects in schools, nurseries and other venues, we have organised family storytelling events at Baxter Park in Dundee, Cupar Gala Day, West Fest in Dundee and the Big Tent environmental festival in Falkland. We are always looking for new members and new ideas, and we pride ourselves on being a friendly and supportive group, so why not come along and join us? Contact Sheila Kinninmonth sheila@blethertaygither.org.uk or see www.blethertaygither.org.uk

3. Borders – Borders Bards
The summer has again been very busy for the Borders Bards. The monthly storytelling session ran with a good core number of people attending, including long time members Sarah Long and Stuart Akers who shared new poetic works. Sarah Long and David McAleece travelled to appear again on stage at Glastonbury Town Hall at the OBOD Druid gathering. The group’s main event, the Wooplaw Story Gathering in August, was a blast! Storytellers Garry Durham, Alasdair Taylor and Mary Kenny came along and joined us for this weekend around the roaring campfire. Each month we aim to loosely work with the themes of the Celtic/Druid festivals, or the seasons. New members are always welcome at our cosy gatherings in our own room at the County Inn in Peebles. Meet us the 2nd Tuesday monthly in the main bar at 7.30pm: £3 donation.

Music, Verse and Stories
Recently the session has undergone some changes. Howard Purdie, the long-time compare and well-known Innerleithen poet has had to step down from being the front man, leaving matters in the capable hand of other members. In September we welcomed the great Borders Americana musician Kathy Stewart. In October we will have the brilliant Spiers family, so do come and join us the first Sunday each month. Folk are welcome to come down 8pm-11pm for a spot alongside the main artists - and you get a free light supper, along with a warm Borders welcome! (£3 donation). Contact David McAleece david@mcaleece.com 0765 394 5019.

4. Perthshire – Silver Branch
Silver Branch are still a small but hardy group of semi nomadic roving tellers gathering in the woodlands, a RSGS Explorer’s room or an architect’s office. Three of us were heard telling stories on Radio Scotland’s Out of Doors programme, as well as at Storytelling from Loch of the Lowes and The Drovers’ Walk at the Highland Folk Museum and Blair Athol Rural Life Museum. We are going to be very busy over the next few months as Enchanted Forest is hosting a storytelling yurt in Faskally Forest. Also one of us regularly tells at the Scottish Crannog Centre. Two members of the group are travelling to North Uist to continue our research and collecting stories connected with a 1890’s patchwork quilt that was discovered in Aberfeldy and links the communities of Heisker, North Uist and Kinloch Rannoch.

Also on 24th October Blair Castle will host an evening of storytelling to celebrate Lady Evelyn Stewart Murray as part of the Scottish International Storytelling Festival. Sheila Stuart, Jess Smith, Claire Hewitt and two guest Breton tellers will share stories and songs in the Great Hall. As part of Luminare: Scotland’s Creative Ageing Festival, we are organising an event that celebrates Claire’s Travelling Tales bike journey on Tell-a-Story Day, where we bring young and old together to tell their stories (see article on page 8). Contact Claire Hewitt clairesach@btinternet.com or 01887 820339 or 07765 166034.

5. Fife – Kingdom Tales
Over the past few months Kingdom Tales has developed considerably as a group and we have now become more firmly established with the acceptance of a constitution and election of office bearers. Group members have been involved in various projects, including school storytelling clubs, one of which resulted in various teen tellers taking part in a competition at the Storytelling Centre.

The quality of their telling was so high that they were invited to host a successful Café Voices evening in July, again at the Storytelling Centre. Kingdom Tales will host an event in Dunfermline at the end of October, with an international storyteller, as part of the Scottish International Storytelling Festival. We are also trying out a new venue - Workspace in Dunfermline - to host our monthly sessions. Contact Andrew Eiston apelston@btinternet.com

6. Glasgow – Better Crack Club and Even Better Crack Club
The Better Crack Club in Glasgow is still going strong. The venue, Tchai Ovna 42 Otago Lane, is just round the corner from Glasgow University, which means we often get people dropping in just for a cuppa but staying the whole evening. We usually meet on the third Friday of the month, except October when we meet on Tell-a-Story Day. Also we don’t meet in December as it is too near to Christmas.

Contact Sheila Hewitt clairesach@btinternet.com or 01887 820339 or 07765 166034.

Storytelling across Scotland
So, if you’re in Glasgow at 7.30pm on any other 3rd Friday, come along for a relaxed, friendly evening of stories, music and song.

The Even Better Crack Club
Storytelling for ALL the family on Saturdays in the Fairfield Room, The Mitchell Library, Granville Street, Charing Cross, Glasgow. Meetings are from 10.30am to 12.00pm. Our meetings in 2012 are 8th September, 10th November and 8th December. In 2013 we meet on 12th January, 16th February (for weetom’s birthday party), 23rd March, 11th May and 8th June.
Contact Frances Logan loganfrances@ymail.com

7. Grampian – Grampian Association of Storytellers
GAS meets for a Friday Fling every second Friday of the month, usually at Queen’s Cross Church, Aberdeen, for telling and listening to stories at 7.15pm for 7.30pm start. We have a great line up of guest storytellers this half year and some very funny and intriguing themes for our DIY sessions. All (over 12 years old) are welcome.
Contact Claire Milne gas_story@hotmail.com 07743993271 www.grampianstorytellers.org.uk

8. Edinburgh – Edinburgh’s Guid Crack club
Over the last few months we have been treated to stories by Peter Snow (with some of the folk who finished a Storybikes tour that day in the audience), Daniel Allison, Donna Bowyer, Marie Louise Cochrane and our own Andy Hunter. We continue to welcome visitors from all over the globe. Some arrive in Edinburgh already intending to come to the Guid Crack club or the Storytelling Centre, while others only come across us once they’ve arrived. It’s also a pleasure when local folk find us, and express delight at having made a new discovery on their doorstep. We are looking forward to hearing from Alex Patience, Lari Don, Bob Knight, Michael Williams and Gerry Durkin over the next 6 months. In October, when we coincide with the Storytelling Festival, we will have our customary open evening. As always, we meet on the last Friday of every month at 7.30pm at The Waverley Bar, St Mary’s Street.
Contact Andy Hunter andy@storybikes.co.uk

9. Lothian – BagaTelle
BagaTelle has been going for some three years now and have built up a warm and friendly group. Our main aim is to tell stories, give feedback and find ways to develop our practice by telling at the group’s meetings or by finding venues in Midlothian to tell at. We sometimes have visiting guest tellers and our meetings are generally themed. We are open to all, you will be warmly welcomed and encouraged whatever stage you are at. Our meetings take place on the first Monday of the month (unless it is a bank holiday) at Dalkeith Library from 7pm onwards.
Contact Lea Taylor lea-andy@tiscali.co.uk 0131 660 5783

LIVING VOICES
Poetry and Stories across Scotland

The Scottish Storytelling Centre is working with the Scottish Poetry Library to pilot regular sessions of story, poetry and song in care homes in three areas of Scotland: Aberdeen, South Ayrshire and Perth and Kinross.

Storytellers, poets or musicians will lead highly participative sessions, prompting individuals to remember and share and celebrate life stories, memories, and community lore. Session leaders will work closely with volunteers and care home staff, who will support delivery and develop their own skills, learning and experience.

Stories, poetry and song are powerful tools to spark engagement, pleasure and reminiscence, offering opportunity for enjoyment, social engagement and laughter as memories are shared.

There are a number of ways to get involved:

- Practitioners experienced in participative projects with older groups and able to work in the pilot areas might be interested in becoming a session leader.

- If you want to develop skills and experience in working with older audiences and are able to work in the pilot areas you might be interested in a volunteer role.

To find out more about Living Voices, email livingvoices@spl.org.uk.

Living Voices is funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, the Baring Foundation and Creative Scotland.

Emma Faragher
Travelling Tales

At the beginning of May I set off on my Giant bike (with a basket of flowers, silk banner floating behind me and my Grannie’s magic copper kettle) and over a week I cycled, very slowly, round the lochs and glens of Highland Perthshire, where I live.

The start and end of the circular path was the ancient settlement of Moulin. The project was supported by Highland Perthshire Cycling Festival and the aim was to connect the remote communities of Tummel, Rannoch and Breadalbane with local stories and tales of journey - some collected in 1891 by Lady Evelyn Stewart Murray - and inspire people of all ages to get out on their bikes.

For a week I collected stories from local folk who had lived in the Straths all their lives and in the evenings I organised Kitchen Ceilidhs, where neighbours gathered to share stories, songs and a feast of food prepared by the evening’s host, a feast which incidentally also ensured that the weary troubadour (me) left rested and heartily full the next day.

I also organised workshop visits to six schools along the journey and there I shared local tales connected to the landscape and then worked with small groups of children to create a Story Cycle - a wonder tale linked to local folklore and environment. As the story emerged I had the responsibility of carrying its thread to the next community, helping the children connect with what had gone before and then carefully stitching it all together in one tale.

As my wheels spun slowly round, I had precious time to feel the stories that the landscape I was passing through held, weaving the cuckoo’s spring song into a Cycle Rap as I plodded around the Lochs or singing along with blackbird and crow.

Every once in a while I would stop to have a blether with strangers or to see some amazing trees, so old that if they could speak they would surely whisper incredible stories in our ears. I was amazed at my own bravery for taking to the road and moved to tears by the generosity of the communities that received me. My dearest friends’ support sustained me when the hills seemed too long and steep.

The journey over, I sat in my home in Aberfeldy, remembering the adventure and how it has helped me to understand nature and the heart of what we call wonder tales. And now that the Story Cycle, _The Spider that Spun the Golden Web_, is finished and has been told in all of the schools that helped weave the magic words, I am astonished to realise that my own journey experiences have woven themselves unconsciously into the threads of the tale the children created. It is as if the story was already there just waiting in the mountains and forests to be given voice.

On _Tell-a-Story Day_, 26th October, at Moulin Hall near Pitlochry, _Travelling Tales_ will celebrate the harvest of stories, songs and memories. The event is generously supported and sponsored by Age Scotland’s _Luminate Festival_ and under the theme _Old and Young_ it will bring generations together in a feast of stories. We have invited all the people from the communities I cycled through, as well as local heritage and community groups to hear the children telling the Story Cycle themselves. And if that wasn’t enough, yet another magical story will be told, the amazing tale of the 1890’s _Story Quilt_, found in Aberfeldy, which went missing for three years and was miraculously found on my journey.

At the event we will also launch the creation of a new friendship Story Quilt … and maybe if there is time the Moulin tale of _The Soutar’s Lamp_ will be told by lamplight as it was of old, and the stories will sustain us through the long winter nights ahead. So if you find you have a free afternoon between 2-4pm on Friday 26th October, take a journey to Moulin Hall in Highland Perthshire and join us for a feast of stories and some excellent journey cake. Entrance is free.

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Acts of Trust

Stornoway based storyteller Ian Stephen and artist Christine Morrison have just been shortlisted for the British Awards for Storytelling Excellence in the multi-arts category. Shetland Arts nominated the project which was developed during Ian’s residency with Western Isles Libraries. A series of workshops with school pupils ranging from P1 to S1 was carried out in several Western Isles schools.
Legend Hunting

This summer I decided to go walking for seven weeks through stunning landscapes, with high angular mountains dipping deep into the sea: the islands of Lofoten and Vesterålen in the far North. I’ve followed in the footsteps of Peter Asbjørnsen, an outsider born 200 years ago who, with priest Jørgen Moe, travelled collecting Norwegian fairytales.

My normal job is full-time storyteller, but for a summer I have been knocking on doors and asking ‘Do you want to hear a story? And have you got one for me?’ I brought a hammock and slept in the forest when I was not invited in.

This is something I wanted to do for a long time, to go out and find hidden tales on the tip of the Norwegian tongue. Stories of birds and fish, of headless seamen and underworld people, of how the ordinary people have lived side by side with nature over the centuries and of how greed for oil threatens its splendour today. Before my journey, I worried that it might be hard to get people talking, but actually although the first thing they usually say is ‘I don’t have any stories’, they are soon willing to share a wealth of tales I didn’t dare hope for.

In Norwegian, the word for fairy tale is Eventyr, in other words Adventure. And this is the perfect word for what this trip has been. Up in the North of Norway, above the Arctic circle, as different from the south as Scotland is from England. The accent reminded me of a Scottish dialect and people are direct, they don’t mince words and are generous hosts. The life they have known is as far from city life as one can imagine. I’ve heard so many tales from folk who when they were children had no running water, no road, no bath and often no school for weeks at a time. They cut turf, milked cows, and worked as shepherds up in the steep mountains and down in the mires. When the boys had been confirmed, they went out fishing with the men. And much of the fishing season was (and is) in the Dark Time when the sun doesn’t rise.

Having lived for 15 years in Norway I have always believed what I had been told, that it was a classless society. That myth is truly punctured now. In the living memory of the people I met, one can still find tales of the ‘housemen’ who had to work in a feudal way for the landowner. And that wasn’t the poorest class either, there was a layer below of people who rented a stretch of beach to fish from. These were huge families, where the father was often lost at sea or the mother sick, and the children fostered into another huge family.

But there wasn’t only poverty and hardship. As dusk fell each night, they sat during the twilight hours watching the fire until the lamp was lit, and then the stories were told. They were never alone, they felt the Lord was looking down from heaven and they were close to the creatures they hunted or cared for. The small house was so full that some children, until they were confirmed, had to stand to eat.

Many of those I’ve met know the tales of their family who were farmers, fishermen, fishers. And many of these tales have been confirmed, had to stand to eat. Many of those I’ve met know the birds returning year after year, like the kittiwakes. There are many predators - eagles, foxes, crows and the large gulls, so smaller seabirds and hares find protection by the houses of these people. And even the elk, in the hunting season, hides behind an old lady’s house!

In addition to these personal stories I found plenty of local legends and stories from the other world. In the stormy winter seas rows Draugen, a headless fisherman in a half boat, and Huldra lives behind a door of rock and is famous for her beauty and for trying to lure men into the mountain. But I was surprised to come across quite another side of her in the tales of these people, of how she cares for the animals when a mother gives birth. I even met a woman who claims she met Huldra twice as a child. There are also many stories of plants and herbs and of mountains: trolls who have been caught in the act of evil deeds as the sun rose and were turned into stone. One such tale was recited in verse by a woman as she baked buns.

Beside all these of course I have collected tales of my own adventure, as I struggled to climb these dramatic heights with my special talent for losing the path. And each day, as dusk neared, at times I was taken by a fear of knocking on doors, a fear of the rain and of the strong North wind. But outside or inside, up a hill or down in a dale, I have always been met with kindness.

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You can read Georgiana’s blog on www.legendhunting.wordpress.com
A Bardic Journey to Skye

On Thursday 21st June a wee bus left Edinburgh to begin a "Bardic Journey" to the Skye Storytelling Festival, at Glendale.

1. Leaving the Forth there were ten on a bus, Heading for Skye without any fuss. Into the Highlands, north they would go, To spend the night at low’ring Glen Coe.

2. Pick up one other at Kilmahog, A greying shepherd without a sheepdog. Past Buchanan the bard at Bonnie Strathclyde And graves of MacGregors slain by sword and fire.

3. Through Dochart where strode Finn McCoul And painted Fillan sat on his stool. Past the Munro of shapely Ben Doran, To meet Ban Macintyre at Inveroran.

4. O’er wild muirland of lonely Rannoch, Where many a stalker laid red deer gralloch. Under the Herdsman we went down to the sea, Seeing campers and rocks with tents in the lea.

5. Falls of the Piper, where the hero fell too, As blood drenched the snow in dark ’92. Stories of Finn told by hillsides so steep. Taking refuge at Clachaig and a night’s sleep.

6. Stark stone at the edge of Glen Coe, To MacDonalds felled by the evilest of foe. And onto a journey of a great many miles, We set off along the Road to the Isles.

7. The path of the Campbells to the Great Glen, Montrose surprised them and killed many men. A castle thrown up by magical chance, The place, long ago, of the Alliance with France.

8. On the braes of Lochaber ancient yews stand. Guarding old graves in deep glacial sand A church to St Cyril built up in stone Harp music speaks of bard Iain Lom.

9. Lunch in the sun, on Laggan’s south lock. Seven heads of Keppoch dipped in the loch. Through Bunloinn Forest with many a tree, Past five Kintail Sisters with dresses of scree.

10. Eilean Donan once held by MacRae, Where witchcraft brought a harper to play. The musician crossed water, arriving quite dry, While we took the bridged route over to Skye.

11. The love lilt’s of Ross gave us all thrills, And exploits of Finn in high Cuillin hills. Poems and harp tunes of Sheila Macdonald, Daughter of sixteenth chief of Clan Ranald.

12. Dunvegan’s a stop, for wine and look at the castle. At Blind Harpers croft, no roof and no cattle. A lament to MacLeod sends us on our way West into Glendale, first night of our stay.

13. Rhymes in the morning to help set the scene, Of generations and all time that’s been. Giant MacAskill killed here by McPhee, The tinker cutting him off at the knee.

14. A walk out the glen for those who were able, Into stories and views of MacLeod’s famous table. Warm sun shone on sheep and flowers galore And ground where heroes were hacked down in gore.

15. The ceilidh at night was properly done With stories and song and a great deal of fun. The hall emptied out into a mid-summer dim, The Sabbath had started; no time for a hymn.

16. Back to the croft looking over the sea And the telling of tales with whiskies and tea. Down on the shore waves rolled in with clatter, This is one place where time does not matter.

17. We take leave of the folk who own their glen, Thanks to the people and seven brave men. Crofters from Glendale stood up for their right, Defying the lairds, their power and their might.

18. Gunboats were sent to crush the uprising, They were made welcome - rather surprising! Gladstone set up Lord Napier’s Commission Who soon put the crofters in a better position.

19. Sunday’s last call was at St Columba’s Isle. Clan Nicholson chiefs rest here for a while. Ard Brennan came for the saint’s salvation, The first Christian king of the whole Scottish nation.

20. Four days in June have sped away and gone, Collective mem’ries surely linger on. Many chronicles of the Old and New Guard, Mary of the Poems, and every other Bard.

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Threading the Garland - Storytelling's Crowning Art

Donald Smith, Director of the Scottish International Storytelling Festival hails some important milestones in the global renaissance.

What is a story? According to classical definition stories should have a beginning, middle and an end, they should have a coherent structure or plot and they should have characters that speak and act consistently throughout. Clearly, Aristotle, or whoever first framed these criteria, did not consult any oral storytellers.

The uncomfortable - or entrancing - truth is that in practice storytellers have always disregarded such logical benchmarks. A unitary structured tale is provocation to any storyteller worth their salt. Confronted by such a neat narrative unit, storytellers naturally seek digressions and ornament. They discern a story within the story, and then another within that, while dreaming of different endings that might precede the middle or never actually happen in that telling at least. It is less a matter of deconstruction than of brolithe re-imagining, retelling through reinvention. Equally compulsive is the storyteller’s desire to procreate. One story leads to another, then another, and before you know it they have begun to thread a garland. A story cycle is born and the germination of plots within the story has become multiplication. Eat your heart out, Aristotle, along with all the tribe of textually bound critics.

But collections cannot simply be accumulations of narrative units, they must resonate with thematic crosscurrents. How have editors, performers and collectors articulated those units within diversity, and how have these reinventions reflected cultural and social pressures? These questions gain sharper focus with the recent publication of Elizabeth Laird’s selective re-telling of The Shanameh, and the second volume of Ramsay Wood’s masterly recreation of Kalila and Dimna. Here two fine contemporary storytellers pay tribute to the ancient and honourable art of multiplication.

The Shanameh of Ferdowsi is Iran’s national epic - the Persian Book of Kings, which combines mythology, heroic legend, romance, history and compiles and unifies the traditions of countless predecessors. Laird’s retelling is aimed at younger readers, but in fact her classically formed and evocative prose, which also uses short poetic quatrains as a form of psychological and narrative punctuation, appeals to all age groups. By focussing on one unifying sequential narrative, culminating in the tragic story of Sohrab and Rustum, Laird achieves a narrative unity that is not as prominent in the original. However she is unwinding one rich thread in order to entice us back into Ferdowsi’s multi-coloured tapestry. In that endeavour she has the inspired collaboration of her illustrator Shirin Adl.

The result is a selection of tales with coherent and cumulative emotional force, an apparently effortless work conceived with great skill, and a tribute of love to one of the world’s great storytelling traditions.

The same act of opening fresh doors on an ancient narrative masterpiece animates Ramsay Wood’s recreation of Kalila and Dimna, also known in its earliest Hindu recension as The Panchatantra. On one level these compilations are collections of animal fables, but on another they are also subtle inter-weavings of framing devices within framing devices, and stories within stories. These tales also carry a subtle psychological cargo of wisdom, and Wood’s lively contemporary reworking highlights the storytelling style of the originals.

Here is the way to ‘get inside’ this extraordinary and ever extending palace of the art, taking as our guide the beguiling lure of one well told tale which leads to another, and back to an earlier context, and then forward again by apparent indirection. Gradually we realise that these deceptively simple and unassuming narrators hold the keys to the house of wisdom, if we accept the guiding of the tales. Ramsay Wood’s tour employs all the linguistic gusto and humorous relish of the oral storytellers with whom he is in such obvious sympathy. But Wood is also a skilled commentator and interpreter. This, the second volume of his compendious re-telling, includes a valuable essay which shows how successive framing devices and introductions to the story cycles have been modified according to different religio-cultural contexts. From a probable Buddhist origin, the material was redesigned as Hindu fable, and then again as a European and an Arabic masterpiece. Each re-creation subtly modulates the structure and interpretation of the whole, while preserving vital core material. Wood aims for nothing less than a re-working for our twenty-first century times, restoring their inheritance to storytellers and his sources to the status of truly adult entertainment. The result is beguiling, unstuffy, irreverent, and a delight to read or hear. Anyone who cares about storytelling now needs to dip into Wood.

To this box of storytelling wonders we should add the extraordinary find of a fifth, final, and for centuries unknown, branch of the Welsh medieval masterpiece The Mabinogion, available as yet only through the internet.

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BOOK BLEthers

Things are being completed with style in this year of Creative Scotland. The second part of the unique creative biography of Duncan Williamson, which David Campbell started in A Traveller in Two Worlds, concludes with The Tinker and the Student, which centres around the marriage of Duncan with Linda Headlee and all the personal and artistic results of that partnership. It is a gripping read and more than fulfils the promise of volume one which covers the early life of Scotland’s wandering bard.

Millie Gray adds a fourth feather to her Leith cap with Eighteen Couper Street which goes back in time to fill in the background to her Campbell family sagas. Beginning from her own family stories Millie has widened her range as a novelist and encompasses key historic experiences as well as personal dramas in a tale set in the early twentieth century. Her many fans will not be disappointed.

With Magnus Fin and the Selkie Secret Janis Mackay completes a trilogy set on Scotland’s far north coast, marked by beautiful descriptive writing and a lovely storytelling rhythm in the prose. Magnus continues to move between land and sea, half human, half seal, with all the attendant quests and adventures.

Stuart McHardy puts the finishing touches to the Brave movie with Scotland the Brave Land. This collection points us to the stories and the culture that underlie Brave and connect us to ten thousand years of Scottish history. No small claim, but the range of stories proves McHardy’s point. Stuart is also co-author of Arthur’s Seat: Journeys and Evocations which pulls together the stories and traditions surrounding Arthur’s Seat and Holyrood. Luath Press has made an excellent job of this volume with map and photos - a fine example of stories living in the landscape.

From the northeast comes Elizabeth Stewart’s Up Yon Wilde and Lonely Glen, co-authored and mothered into being by Alison McMorland. This volume is the fruit of many years of work on the ballad and music traditions of the Fetterangus. Stewarts, and it’s sure to become a classic reference point for students and musicians alike. Here is another rich completion which will bring huge satisfaction and much relief to the long working co-authors.

Also from the northeast, Sheila Blackhall continues to produce fine poetry, songs and stories in Scots and English, the latest of which are gathered in Steens. Sheena is great on paper but even better in live action, so for lyric and narrative song poems you can also turn to the recently released CD As High As The Wild Geese Fly, which is a tribute collection to the late Tony McManus. Beautifully produced, the CD gives Tony’s artistry its voice once more, with credit to Tony’s family and friends, particularly John Greig for this artistic labour of love.