

*"For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of Kings."*  
Shakespeare, *King Richard II*

*"Stories are sequences in time but they are not time-bound. This is because they encapsulate memory and memory is the human faculty which works constantly to instil emotion, meaning and value into the sequence of happenings."*

Donald Smith, *Storytelling Scotland*

*"The realm of fairy-story is wide and deep and high and filled with many things: all manner of beasts and birds are found there; shoreless seas and stars uncounted; beauty that is an enchantment, and an ever-present peril; both joy and sorrow sharp as swords. In that realm a man may, perhaps, count himself fortunate to have wandered, but its very richness and strangeness tie the tongue of the traveller who would report them. And while he is there it is dangerous for him to ask too many questions, lest the gate should be shut and the keys be lost."*

J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*

#### **THE NEED FOR NARRATIVE**

We need narrative; it is our system of making sense of the world. Through narrative we can link people, places and events to an understandable time frame. A leads to B which leads to C. Everything in our history is a part of a narrative; mythology, religion, culture, science even history itself, everything is a process through time and to make sense of it we create stories.

Stories and storytelling are fundamental aspects of human nature. Stories were being told long before the written word developed; indeed they are as old as man. Documentation exists of storytelling from all cultures around the world. Records of storytelling can be found in Sanskrit, Old German, Chinese, Greek, Latin, Icelandic and Old Slavonic. One of the earliest surviving records of storytelling can be found in the Westcar Papyrus of the ancient Egyptians where the sons of Cheops (the pyramid builder) entertained their father with stories.

In her 1997 book *"The World of Storytelling"* Anne Pellowski presents evidence to support several theories on the origins of storytelling and its purpose, including:

1. That it grew out of the playful, self-entertainment needs of humans;
2. That it satisfied the need to explain the surrounding physical world.
3. That it came about because of an intrinsic religious need in humans to honour or respect the supernatural force(s) believed to be present in the world.
4. That it evolved from the human need to communicate experience to other humans.
5. That it fulfilled an aesthetic need for beauty, regularity, and form through expressive language and music.
6. That it stemmed from the desire to record the actions or qualities of one's ancestors, in the hope that this would give them a kind of immortality.

*"Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it."*  
Hannah Arendt

#### **SEANCHAIDH**

In ancient Scotland the role of Storyteller or Seanchaidh was a position of major importance. The clan bard or Seanchaidh was, with the clan, piper, chaplain and physician, an important member of every chief's household, occupying an honoured position in society. They were the entertainers and the historical teachers of each clan. His position was often passed down through the generations of the same family and the stories would be repeated in more or less the same words through the centuries.

*"...memory is basic to all human culture but it is seen in a very pure and concentrated form in oral storytelling."*

*Donald Smith, Storytelling Scotland*

One of the most important of the Seanchaidh's duties was to celebrate the heroic deeds of the chief and his ancestors (*6 see above*). This was regarded not only of benefit to the living in encouraging the present clan to emulate their ancestors but also was considered pleasing to the dead as well. Its practise was meant to ease the spirits in the next realm and the duty was carried out with almost religious enthusiasm. The stories were also a way of raising courage before battle and were even continued onto the battlefield where they helped maintain morale.

Being such a central part of the clan spirit the Seanchaidh became a target for the *miorun mor nan Gall*, the lowlanders historic hated of the Highlanders. The attempts of the Scottish Crown to eradicate them initiated by James VI continued throughout the seventeenth century with backing from both the church and state. The Gaelic language was to be destroyed and the people taught to use, "*the English tongue*." They were not successful in destroying the traditions completely though and although many tales were lost the old verses continued to be recited down through the generations. Later in the nineteenth century when interest in the old ways of Scotland began to be revived there were still enough storytellers to assist the researchers. There is not as large a difference between the written and spoken word in Gaelic and the tales that were recorded at this time still have the raw vibrancy and life of the original tellers in their pages.

With the loss of the clan system and the clan Seanchaidh the role of storyteller was taken up by anyone who had a natural gift for storytelling though these were usually linked by blood to the ancient ways. Many of the best and most original surviving tales come from the islands, where the tradition of storytelling and the lineage of storytellers is longest lasting and was least effected by the cull.

#### **PLACE**

The need to explain the surrounding world (*2 see above*) plays a large part in the Scottish storyteller's role. To ancient man the world was full of mysteries and wonders. Storytellers helped to fill in the gaps making the world a more understandable and safer place. Through their stories, Scottish Storytellers would explain the formation of landscape - the giants of Bennachie, the interventions of carlins, witches and maidens in the formation of lochs, whirlpools, rivers and glens. There was a powerful personification in Scottish landscape, which can still be felt today. The entire country can be mapped out, through the tales of the lands formation. Each river has its own tale; each mountain was carved by a certain giant, or placed as a curse on evil men.

The nature of the tales alters as you pass through the country. Each area of Scotland has its own flavours. These are caused by the physicality of the landscape of the area and by the historical events that have taken place there.

#### **WEST HIGHLANDS AND HEBRIDES**

The stories from the highlands are a mix of old Christian beliefs overlaid on even older Pictish tales and traditions. This was brought about by the Celtic people called the Scots arriving in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD and settling with the Picts in the Highlands. This meant that tales of the Saints were mixed with tales of fairies, waterbeasts and the spirits of the dead.

There were close links with nature and the spirits that guarded the springs, caves and standing stones. A lot of the stories involved caring/ respecting the land for fear of retribution. Thanks to the development of the clan system there was a great deal of continuity within the tales with songs and poems handed down from generation to generation. The oddly mingled character of the highlanders comes out through their tales, sentiment, loyalty, courage and toughness. There is a story of a young chief who on a return journey from France is caught up in a snow storm. Unable to go any further the chief rolls himself a snowball places his head upon it and goes to sleep. He loses the faith of his men. Despite the dangers they face, all they can think about is how will this young man overcome the burdens he will face as their new chief if he can't go to sleep without a pillow?

The land still echoes with memories of the clearances and they fill a whole generation of stories themselves. Many of the stories from this point now talk of things that have been lost, traditions and legends but also as if Scotland's landscape has somehow died. Many of the spirits that dwelled in the springs and mountains fall under spells and go to sleep. Many of the giants and dragons are killed and the great hero's sail for distant islands.

#### **Badenoch, Inverness**

There are many stories about how the great Caledonian forest, which once covered all of the highlands, was eventually destroyed. Most accounts blame it on a Scandinavian king whose own forests were not nearly so impressive. He is said to have brought his foster-mother, a hideous, winged monster, to Scotland and set her to fly over the forests, flinging burning brands down upon the trees. The *muime*, as she was called, flew far above the clouds, spreading destruction everywhere.

But a hunter at Badenoch put an end to her mischief, according to one version of the legend, by getting the local people to separate all the animals from their young. Such a chorus of bleating and lowing went up that the *muime* poked her head through the clouds to see what was going on. Whereupon the hunter from Badenoch shot her with a silver bullet and she fell to her death.

#### **NORTH EAST**

The tales of Aberdeenshire were similar to the tales of the lowlands. They too distrusted their' after life and the black arts were practised. The Devil himself walked abroad in this area shaping the land at his will. The chill of the winds off the sea seems to have hardened the people however and they refused to take the Devil seriously. Life for these people may have been difficult but there was nothing that

could not be overcome by hard work. Many of the tales of the area tell of people falling foul of the Devil's tricks and their eventual triumph over him. Many of the rivers, lochs and caves of the area are associated with dark creatures waiting to take advantage of unsuspecting passers by.

Congarff, Aberdeen

One of the kelpie's (or water spirit's) less endearing traits was to spring up behind horsemen and hug them, thus causing considerable distress to the rider and his mount. On other occasions, a kelpie would assume the shape of a water horse. One man, anxious to cross the swollen river Don to reach his sick wife, found the Bridge of Luib swept away, and accepted a kelpie's offer to ferry him over on its back. Halfway across, the beast submerged, hoping to drag its victim down. He escaped, however and swam to safety. The kelpie, cheated of its prey, heaved a boulder after him, which is still known as "the kelpie's stone."

#### **ORKNEY AND SHETLANDS**

The stories of Orkney are intrinsically linked to the islands two main occupations, farming and fishing. Fishermen had their own tales to explain the dangers that faced them at sea. Two giantesses, Fenya and Menya, grinding salt in a handmill on the sea floor, caused a whirlpool called the Swelkie in the Pentland Firth. Selkies and Fin-folk, mermaids and sea monsters plagued the fishermen's lives. There were spirits and evil witches controlling the sea and the wind and every sailor had to prepare himself spiritually before setting sail.

The farmer's life was less dangerous but he too had to contend with malicious spirits bent on destroying his harvest. Magic was a daily part of farmer's lives with incantations and rituals carried out each morning.

These acts of magic and battles with mythical creatures came to the islands from their Nordic settlers. Much of the islands names and stories are taken from Scandinavian customs.

Dwarfie Stane, Hoy, Orkney

Dwarfs were supposed to have chiselled the two small cells in Hoy's rock-cut tomb, the Dwarfie Stane. The tomb lies below hillside cliffs called Dwarfie Hamars, whose echo was thought to be the voices of dwarfs. A later legend makes the cells the beds of a giant and a pregnant giantess.

#### **POWER OF A NAME**

The most lasting testament to these tales is in the place names, which survive today even if the stories behind them are lost to most. An understanding of place names and their stories can have a profound impact on how you view a place. Even simple street names come under reappraisal when their explanation is revealed. E.g. St. Enoch square is named after St Enoch the mother of St. Mungo who formed the cathedral at Glasgow and so gave birth to the cities legend, coat of arms and spiritual identity.

During the course of the post grad we visited the Scottish Sculpture workshop in Lumsden, Aberdeenshire and worked on some sites there. The area around Lumsden is deeply layered in history; every hill and every wood has some kind of historical significance. The people we were working with were well versed in the tales of the area and passed on what stories they could. I began to re-evaluate the area in light of the stories I was learning. There are some excellent old legends about the area and the way that the land was shaped by the feuding giants Jock o Bennachie and Jock o Noth, or the tale of the devils causeway and the maiden stone.

These stories were shaped and created by the land around the people who spoke them. By hearing the stories your experience of the place is also shaped and created. I started to do more research into the area and read some of the old folktales and legends. These tales are interwoven with so many truths and half-truths that it is difficult to tell what is myth and what is fact. When standing alone in the highlands the power of these stories can be immense, it is easy to see the stories of old and imagine great dragons sleeping beneath the hillocks and shadowy kelpies lurking in the depths of lochs. As you read these tales and gaze out across the landscape, it is easy to allow yourself to believe that the tales of the shaping of the landscape may have some truth in them

*"Land and environment shape the story while stories influence how we see the world of nature."*

*Donald Smith, Storytelling Scotland*

#### **LEARNING LESSONS**

The lines between myth and reality in the folklore can be very blurred, combining real places and historical figures with mystical creatures and supernatural forces. The stories do however all deal with real human problems and all have lessons to teach.

*(4 see above)* In the first ancient cases these stories probably consisted of, "Don't eat those berries over there, Ug did and he's dead." They developed however to not only include practical advice but shared living advice too. Although customs differed, storytelling played a strong role in traditional societies. Through the stories of a nation we can see aspects of that cultures social values and traditions. Storyteller Heather Forest describes stories as being divided into sections - problem, inner traits that cause problem, inner traits leading to solution and solution. These deal with all the basic human emotions and problems; love, greed, laziness, revenge, courageousness, imagination, kindness, cleverness, strength etc. Some of the best known of these lesson stories are the animal fables from the slave Aesop in 600BC Greece. These stories have their equivalent in Scottish fairytales and folklore. "The Elfin Knight", teaches of foolishness, "The Red-Etin", teaches of greed, "The Dwarfie stone" teaches of jealousy. It is through these stories that the ancient men of our nation spread their beliefs and lessons about correct behaviour and attitude. Stories were used to introduce children to correct behaviour in an entertaining way. In some cultures, storytelling for the young was considered more important than for adults.

*"I incline to come to the alarming conclusion that it is just the literature that we read for 'amusement' or 'purely for pleasure' that may have the greatest and least suspected influence on us."*

T. S. Eliot

The act of storytelling then is a form of teaching personal development and of community spirit. It also stimulates the visual and verbal imagination and makes people better communicators, better listeners and interpreters. However in our present modern climate of mobile phones, Internet and multi-channel TV is there still a place for Oral Storytelling?

*"The fairy tale journey may look like an outward trek across plains and mountains, through castles and forests, but the actual movement is inward, into the lands of the soul. The dark path of the fairy tale forest lies in the shadows of our imagination, the depths of our unconscious. To travel to the wood, to face its dangers, is to emerge transformed by this experience. Particularly for children whose world does not resemble the simplified world of television sit-coms ... this ability to travel inward, to face fear and transform it, is a skill they will use all their lives. We do children--and ourselves--a grave disservice by censoring the old tales, glossing over the darker passages and ambiguities..."*

*Terri Windling, "White as Snow: Fairy Tales and Fantasy," in Snow White, Blood Red*

*"Storytelling exercises memory, stimulates mental development, brings people into contact with each other and counteracts the corrosion of trust and identity inherent in an economic system driven by impersonal mechanisms and objectives. Storytelling gives us back our ability to see ourselves and each other as characters in connected narratives."*

*Donald Smith, Storytelling Scotland*

#### **STORYTELLING PRESENT**

In the last few years there has been a worldwide resurgence in oral traditions and storytelling. There are now worldwide festivals and events taking place throughout the year. This is the case in Scotland as well.

*"Storytelling is undergoing quite a revival in Scotland at the moment. There are festivals across the country and there are lots of storytelling clubs setting up as well. It is a community art form which people find very accessible."*

*Joanna Bremner, coordinator of the Scottish Storytelling Centre*

In 1997 the Scottish Storytelling Centre was set up in the Netherbow, John Knox House Edinburgh. Originally set up by three volunteers working part-time to gather and record the storytelling traditions and legends of Scotland it has now expanded into a network of 80 professional storytellers across Scotland with a further network of 500 community storytellers (librarians, teachers etc) who use storytelling in their community or professional lives. The latest survey conducted in 2002 indicated that 230,000 people of all ages took part in storytelling activities organised by the SSC last year. The number of people actually involved in storytelling events could be much higher with other storytellers operating outside of the network.

So popular has storytelling become again that the Scottish Executive has provided money for a £3.24 million Scottish Storytelling Centre and Network. This will provide the structure to the Scottish Storytelling community.

There are also a vast range of festivals that take place each year around Scotland. One of the largest of these takes place in Skye each May and is now in its 7<sup>th</sup> year. Some of the stories being told on Skye have certainly been able to stand the test of time so far. One of them dates back around 2500 years but has been preserved by the skill of generations of storyteller.

It would seem then that there is a social/ human need for Storytelling and that there is an active audience in Scotland seeking it out.

### **STORYTELLING FUTURE**

My thesis work is thinking about what this new Storytelling Network could be. As I have imagined it, there will be a series of small spaces built into the Scottish Countryside. Each of these places is sited on the origin of a Scottish myth or Legend. The structures are designed to tell the story or to hint to the story on which they are based. They are Architectural Follies designed to blur the line between myth and reality.

*"Perhaps, in an age of information overload, oral storytelling remains as important as ever before in human culture. Personal acts of memory and oral communication reaffirm the primacy of human capacities and values, and offer vital clues to attitude, identity and culture on individual and collective levels."*

*Donald Smith, Storytelling Scotland*

*"A story should have a beginning, a middle, and an end... but not necessarily in that order."*

*Jean-Luc Godard*

### **THE END**

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I would also like to thank the Scottish Storytelling Centre who provided valuable data and information to back up my proposal.