

fringe

EDINBURGH BOOK FRINGE

REPORT

19 - 22 august 2004

All speech, written or spoken, is a dead language, until it finds a willing and prepared hearer. This heartfelt statement from Edinburgh's own Robert Louis Stevenson is quoted on the programme of the first Edinburgh Book Fringe; and it was awareness of the treasures of the written word, unknown and invisible to those who attend Edinburgh in its season of festivals, that set in motion the notion of a book fringe.

As current President of Scottish PEN - the international writers' organisation with 130 centres around the world, that defends freedom of speech and campaigns for writers who are silenced, harassed, intimidated or imprisoned, wherever they are - I was acutely aware of the hundreds of writers living in Scotland, writing in many varying genres, who were simply invisible and unknown, however successful or professional.

When Gavin MacDougall of Luath Press said he would help to set up an Edinburgh Book Fringe and the City Art Centre offered a free venue, it seemed impossible to refuse to try.

We knew that other groups over the years have put on literary events and readings on the fringe, so what we were suggesting was only new in that it was specifically aimed at presenting writers in Scotland who were not already involved in the Edinburgh International Book

*Below left: (l-r) Alanna Knight, Tessa Ransford and Antonia Swinson.
Below: Robin Harper opens the Edinburgh Book Fringe.*



Festival in Charlotte Square. We also wanted the many festival visitors to Edinburgh to have the chance of accessing writers in Scotland they may not have heard of in their distant lands!

It became apparent that we would not receive government funding. What we did receive was people support. With volunteer help and bits of sponsorship here and there we went ahead. Our biggest surprise was the number of writers who applied to take part, despite having an impossibly short time in which to do so, due to difficulties with setting up our website. We had only fifteen open slots to offer and there were nearly seventy applicants. It was not difficult to put together a lively and varied programme. That was one point settled: writers in Scotland need more of a platform, need more representation during the festival, need to become known beyond the smallish circle of those who take an interest in literature in Scotland.

The next test was that of audiences. To our surprise they too were more than adequate. The average was around twenty-five, but some had as many as sixty and there were over two hundred at the fabulous opening party, when Robin Harper MSP declared open our Edinburgh Book Fringe. Thirty-five attended workshops and over four hundred attended the range of events. Given the competition for audiences at this time, we were pleased with the numbers. We offered an excellent bookstall provided by Word Power Bookshop, which was itself running its own series of literary events in the evenings. Irene Gardiner, one of our team of volunteers has commented: I was amazed that this series of first-class, dynamic events could be conjured in such a short time **OUT OF NOTHING!**

All the events were of a high calibre and the writers are to be congratulated on the quality and professionalism of their performances. The discussions and workshops were also challenging and innovative. We started with an *alternative arts breakfast*, planned and organised by Donald Smith, attended by thirty participants, to discuss the principles and progress of the government's current

“ beauty in things lies in the



Cultural Commission. This can only be described as probably one of the best discussions on the arts in Scotland I've heard in my thirty years of involvement. We had Sheena Wellington from the Cultural Commission present, along with Magnus Linklater, Jenni Calder, George Gunn, Joy Hendry, John Herdman and Owen Logan, who recently co-authored a pamphlet: *Towards Cultural Democracy*.

“ real people in a real place ”



The discussion was under the four headings: 1. No Crisis in Culture; 2. Not just for the politicians but they play a part; 3. Culture is about Ideas; 4. Excellence, Access and Distinctiveness. Under the first heading Donald argued that the situation and the expectations have changed and expanded, so that we need new kinds of response and enablement. Under the second he argued that

mind which contemplates them. ”

David Hume



‘management is not enough; we need a wide engagement if society is to progress’; under the third he asked ‘what kind of Scotland in what kind of world?’ and under the fourth he made a claim for aesthetic strengths, cultural difference, diversity and distinctiveness in local, regional, national and international contexts.

It would take too long to thank everybody, as there were a great many involved, from the sponsors, through the writers and audiences, to the volunteers and helpers. Let’s not forget artist Ruby Elizabeth Littlejohn, who freely provided two exquisite wall hangings specially to grace our events, inspired by ‘myth, nature and the spiritual



“ The perennial debate in Edinburgh during the festivals is the extent to which they are actually relevant to the development and enrichment of Scottish culture. The most extreme on either sides of this divide argue vehemently either against what is perceived as parochialism, or against what is suspected to be arrogance. Somewhere in between, as ever, is the truth: the festivals could do more, but the best way to influence them is not to carp about the good things that aren’t. Tessa has again shown the truth of that maxim, and this first Book Fringe is a good try at injecting a level of scottish involvement which can benefit both ourselves and those who come to see us in August. I hope it will be the first of many. ”

Mike Russell
The Herald, Sept 4th

Photographs:
Above, from left: Tessa, Robin and Antonia at EBF opening party. Robin Harper and Stuart McHardy. Elspeth Murray read at both the opening party and as part of *Permission to Squeak*. Sheena Blackhall, *Writing in Scots*.

From left to right: Doug Watt read at both the opening party and as part of *The Forth Stanza*. Kokumo Rocks. Word Power book stall. (l-r) Antonia, David Cousland from Triodos Bank, Tessa and Robin at EBF opening party. Workshop at EBF.

interconnection of things'. Our main steering committee consisted of myself, Tessa Ransford, as chair, Gavin MacDougall as treasurer and Antonia Swinson as secretary. Dana Cohlmeier was the voluntary administrator who carried through the whole programme. Helen Loughlin helped out with final public relations and media contact. Robin Harper was our guest of honour at the opening party. Our sponsors were Triodos Ethical Bank, who sponsored the opening party and the big poster in the City Art Centre window; Carter Rae Communications, who designed and printed the programme; Edinburgh City Council through the City Art Centre, who provided the venue and help with publicity; The Edinburgh University Settlement, who provided an office at low rent; Word Power bookshop who provided the bookstalls; Jeffrey Crawford & Co; TESS; a few well-wishing, enlightened Edinburgh citizens and the Michael Marks Charitable Trust. Scottish PEN itself, allowed me to work very hard for eight months on their behalf to help to establish the Edinburgh Book Fringe.

We look forward to a future in Edinburgh as City of Literature. As such it should give first priority to our own writers in Scotland, in whatever language they write and from whatever culture they come. As such it should have the values of art and literature to inform it, backed up by marketing and economics, rather than allowing profitability to be its goal. As such, it should not be intimidated by those who do not believe Scotland should continue to exist as the nation of philosophers, writers, poets and storytellers for which it is internationally renowned. Comedians and footballers are two a penny. Writers are, as Muriel Spark might agree, *la crème de la crème*.

As Brian McCabe has written: *and they all toasted Scotland as a state of mind.*

Tessa Ransford
Chair, Edinburgh Book Fringe
October 2004



Group at Alternative Arts Breakfast.

*“In Scotland's story I read
they came, the Gael and the
Pict, the Angle and the
Dane, but so did the
Irishman, Jew and Ukraine,
they're all Scotland's story
and they're all worth the same”*



Below left to right: (l-r) John Herdman and Donald Smith at lunchtime lecture. Alexander Hutchison at EBF. Word Power book stall.

