

# SEEK OUT THE VOICE OF THE CRITIC

By Ben Haggarty

## A New Foreword (2005)

Re-reading this version of a talk that I gave ten years ago, I'm struck that it now looks almost like a prologue to a book that has yet to be written. 'Seek Out the Voice of the Critic', published and edited by the Society for Storytelling, reported my stocktaking of how the Storytelling revival in England and Wales stood in 1995. It was intended to be a clarion call to action, polemical, even provocative, and in the course of its argument it formulated more than 40 questions to stimulate further thought and debate. And forgive me if this new foreword continues that approach.

During the intervening ten years very many marvellous things have happened to storytelling on the Island of Britain. There has been growth in all directions. The Scottish, liberated by devolution and powered by national pride have been able to create a fabulous permanent Centre for Scottish Storytelling in the Netherbow Centre in Edinburgh. In Wales, The Beyond the Border Wales International Storytelling Festival has established itself as Europe's most 'festive' of festivals, and recently a new initiative, The George Ewart Evans Centre for Storytelling, has been launched under the auspices of the University of Glamorgan. Hugh Lupton and Eric Maddern's annual 'Storytelling in the Mythological Landscape' retreat is in its 12<sup>th</sup> year. In England, The Festival at the Edge is the first – and only – English storytelling organisation to have secured regular 'revenue' funding from the Arts Council of England. 'The Storytelling Café' initiative in the Midlands has pioneered a very popular event model offering adult public access to storytelling in libraries and other community venues. The Crick Crack Club has been presenting regular 'sold out' performance storytelling events in the Barbican Pit Theatre, one of London's most prestigious black box studio theatres for the last three years. There are currently about 54 monthly storytelling clubs happening in pubs and other gathering places on the Island, each drawing average audiences of 45 people. I am particularly happy to find I can name a dozen really fine or promising storytellers living in England and Wales that have emerged since 1995. My own long term ambition to create a permanent venue for storytelling in London is slowly advancing, and we have secured funding to begin archiving sound recordings of the professional and performance storytelling revival made in Britain from 1981 onwards. Two years ago I undertook a detailed survey of storytelling activity in England and Wales, 'Memories and Breath'. It revealed statistical data of the breath taking scale and scope of what's happening now. (I've attached the main quantitative findings as an appendix to this reprint).

All this is external evidence of growth and development during the last decade, but far more interesting is the gradual raising of artistic standards and the growth of a greater understanding of what performance storytelling as an art form entails. Storytelling is now happening in a rich variety of public and community contexts and the repertoire being deployed is expansive. The forum provided by various internet discussion groups has really helped storytellers to strengthen their understanding of their own work and to question the role of storytellers and the place of traditional tales in contemporary society.

One of the most far-reaching achievements of the last decade has been the growth of an informal pan-European storytelling movement, reaching south from Norway and Finland to Spain, Croatia and Greece. This is an organic network that has grown between artists who meet at festivals. Watching each other's work and sharing the same events and audiences has allowed the development of an 'on-going, never-to-be-concluded dialogue'. The sharing of common and idiosyncratic creative questions, dilemmas and problems has vastly broadened the vision of what the art of professional storytelling in Europe already is – and what it could become.

As both a promoter and an artist I have become increasingly sure I made the right decision twenty five years ago to explicitly restrict my working definition of storytelling to 'the oral retelling of traditional tales'. The paradox of a seeming restriction is that it liberates creative intensity. I now find myself

habituated to viewing everything in terms of both form *and* content, separately and together. For example, my studies of form have made me particularly aware of the dynamic tension between orality and literacy. This is profoundly political and my conviction grows that the pen has little place in storytelling except perhaps as an aid to mapping. There are very fine storytellers in Britain and elsewhere who use the pen well, but 'reciting writing' is not the same as 'oral retelling'. There's a discernable difference in terms of immediacy and authenticity between oral language and written language. The pen offers a tempting security; it somewhat guarantees the audience an experience that can be repeated, but it can also be a seductive trap, severing the artist from the essential source of story. Oral language is born of the body and its experiences remembered in the flesh; it is called into form and vibrant sound in the living moment. By contrast, literary language is shaped in the mind, in solitude and in advance of performance – and therefore not only in the absence of 'the myriad variables of now' (which includes the audience and its collective energy), but crucially in the absence of the adrenalin and other extra-ordinary chemicals released by the demands of performance and in particular vocal projection, (microphones are generally eschewed in Britain except when the acoustics of a venue or intrusive sounds really demand them). Storytelling is a mantic art and over reliance on the pen restricts the possibility of inspiration, re-creation and renewal.

Many British and European artists have been fortunate to witness rare genuine tradition bearers from the Fireside tradition, from Tribal traditions and from the Professional tradition, particularly through the Beyond the Border Festival. These wonderful artists almost always demonstrate how much further we 'newcomers' to storytelling have to search before we can find the quality of relaxed and assured deftness with which so many of them hold themselves during performance; a quality recognisable as 'freedom'.

Re-reading this pamphlet, I see that a degree of unresolved tension still resides between the ambitions of the folk and fireside wings of the revival and those of the professional and performance storytelling wing, however I do think there is now a broader appreciation than existed 10 years ago of the very different agendas and values that people are working to or serving. I hope this understanding permits a greater ambience of 'live and let live'. Personally I continue to suggest that it would be more appropriate for professional performance storytellers in Britain and Europe to reflect upon the agendas of say, the Jongleurs, Trouveres, Trobairitz, Troubadours, Minnesingers and all the others associated with the Courts of Love during the 12<sup>th</sup> Century Renaissance, than the rather limited 'social agenda' proposed for storytelling by Marxist folklorists who have dominated much of British and European thought on the subject for the last 50 years or so. However, all this of course remains a matter of subjective choice and of political or spiritual orientation.

The last decade has seen two other areas of significant expansion for storytelling in Britain, and indeed abroad. These are storytelling 'as a healing art' and storytelling 'in business'. The former seems to have a lot of integrity behind it, though I think the boundary between storytellers who are artists and therapists who tell stories should remain clear and distinct: professional storytellers should work in partnership with professionally trained therapists. 'Storytelling in Business' remains controversial.

Ten years ago, during a discussion of this talk, a highly respected French colleague confided that he thought the general standard of *stagecraft* amongst British storytellers was somewhat lacking. My response to this and to the challenges I set myself in 'Seek Out the Voice of the Critic' was to set about researching and developing a critical vocabulary for performance storytelling. Between 1997 and 2001, I held four intensive residential training workshops – three of them were each 5 weeks long, spread over a 12-month period. With the help of 32 British and international students at 'The Centre for the Research and Development of Traditional Storytelling', I evolved practical exercises and systems of analysis that identify at least 85 different creative processes – tools, techniques and strategies – that, once mastered, a storyteller can intentionally call upon in their work *during the immediacy of a performance*. These are tools ranging in application from assisting poetic composition to crafting performance. They all develop both form and content effectively, above all they should equip a

storyteller with the freedom to 'play' – and this should be the stuff of the book to which this is some sort of prologue.

So, the pamphlet before you is old history, a snapshot of my concerns for the revival of storytelling in Britain ten years ago, however, if you've not met such concerns before, it does formulate some interesting questions. The language has been slightly revised but apart from a few additional footnotes and comments needed to update it (and an irresistible Chinese quote) the text is pretty much as it was when the Society for Storytelling first published it.

**BH July 2005**

## SEEK OUT THE VOICE OF THE CRITIC - Revisited

*This piece was developed from a talk entitled, 'The Revival of Storytelling In The Light Of Two Traditions', given to the Folk-Lore Society and The Society for Storytelling on May 6th 1995. It was then edited and published as an SfS Oracles pamphlet in 1996. It was intended to be polemical and it drew some fairly strong reactions both for and against*

### Foreword

I have been closely involved with the Revival of Storytelling on the Island of Britain since 1981, and have watched it evolve and grow with fascination, joy and occasional exasperation. In 1981 there were scarcely a dozen people working with traditional tales here – in a semi-professional or even professional manner – (that is, bringing them before audiences of strangers in conditions involving some element of pecuniary reward)... fourteen years later there are over three hundred people claiming to be professional storytellers working on this Island<sup>1</sup>. During this time many questions and issues have arisen which are worth sharing in the broad forum of those who care about traditional stories and their performance.

These comments come first and foremost from one who loves traditional tales, secondly from one whose sole source of income is from telling them and thirdly from one who, as a researcher and events organizer, has had the fortune to observe and study many, many storytellers both here and abroad. Sharing this document with an audience of storytellers, friends of storytelling, folklorists, educationalists, academics, Arts workers, and who knows who else – gives us all an opportunity to train a spotlight on a 'tradition' which is alive and in a process of transition, recomposing itself here, today, on the largest Island of the West Atlantic archipelago.

Throughout this period I have had the good fortune to work with small groups of respected colleagues, in The West London Storytelling Unit (1981 - 84); The Company of Storytellers (1985 to the present day); The Crick Crack Club (1987 to the present day) and with my colleagues from the 'Beyond the Borders International Storytelling Festival Series' (1993 to the present day). We have constantly discussed and analyzed what we ourselves have been involved with and what has been happening around us. However every word written here is put down in my name alone and if any of it provokes contention – which some of it must – then I, alone, am to answer...

### Introduction

For the purposes of this discussion I wish to limit my definition of 'Storytelling' specifically to 'the Art of the Oral Retelling of Traditional Tales'. I say 'limit' but let's be immediately clear that there are no limits to this particular aspect of storytelling. It is as complete and complex an Art form as 'Painting', 'Sculpture', 'Cinema', 'Literature', 'Theatre' or 'Dance'. These familiar, well-established and recognized Arts all benefit from massive support structures of academic study, training and press criticism. In order to thrive they have generated and accrued extensive creative and critical vocabularies of their own: therefore my first question is: 'Does any such commonly shared language exist for discussing the oral retelling of traditional tales?'

I'm not sure.

One cannot make a degree level study of traditional narrative, storytelling traditions or Comparative Mythology in any English University<sup>2</sup>. Academics occasionally appear studying these subjects, but I get

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<sup>1</sup> In 2004, a survey conducted by the Mouth network of storytellers was able to draw up a list of over 420 storytellers on the Island of Britain and in Northern Ireland who were telling stories for financial reward.

<sup>2</sup> This situation has changed and may change further as there is now a steady flow of students doing their dissertations on storytelling – perhaps a dozen or so a year and, as of 2004, there are at least four PhD holders in Britain whose work was

the distinct impression that they prefer their storytellers incommunicado, that is safely dead or distant, dissectible in transcript. No anthropology or folklore student has yet, to my knowledge, studied any of the very fine proponents of this viable, renewed Performance Art either here or on mainland Europe. In fourteen years of storytelling I have never read an informed critical review of a storytelling performance in any serious newspaper or journal<sup>3</sup>. A tiny handful of Arts Officers attached to the various English and Welsh Arts funding bodies have seen a little storytelling, but few have attended more than half a dozen storytelling events and even fewer have seen the same storyteller more than twice in order to experience different aspects of their repertoire. (The situation appears to be different in Scotland – where art rooted in vernacular tradition has been seized on as a valuable means of affirming national identity). This neglect is highlighted because, if public funding is to continue being committed to this renascent art form – which it must be, and on a more generous scale if it is to grow – then well informed decisions need to be made.<sup>4</sup> Action needs to be taken so that a fair dialogue can evolve between funders and funded. Storytelling, like all Art forms, has an aesthetic language in which those who wish to converse must become versed. How can this be achieved?

The sign of a robust and healthy art form is that it benefits from informed critical debate and probing thought. If, as many of us feel, the storytelling revival in Britain is reaching maturity – even to the point where the use of the word 'revival' becomes questionable – then there must be a vast crop of topics ripe for discussion. Those of us who are directly involved in it have to start the ball rolling – no one else will! So, what follows here is an overview of the broad trends in the Island's storytelling, observed as a storyteller and events promoter, during the past fourteen years<sup>5</sup>. By introducing and suggesting certain elements of vocabulary, I hope to raise questions that will stimulate further creative discussion. On the way I'll also begin trying to offer a basis for the appraisal of a storyteller's skills. I believe that the current standard of storytelling in the land could be raised far higher, but only if we are prepared to seek out and then welcome the critical voices of those who stand outside, observing and hearing our work. At the same time we must also seek out, identify, exercise and listen to our own inner critic. As a starting point, both sets of critics might find it interesting to explore the sorts of questions that could be asked...

## **PART ONE**

### **Two Traditions: Defining a Discovery**

During the preparations for the fifteen day 3rd International Storytelling Festival held at the London South Bank Centre, in 1989, it became clear that there are, and always have been, two distinct

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tangentially if not directly connected to contemporary storytelling practice. A degree course in storytelling is now being offered at the University of Glamorgan.

<sup>3</sup> In 2000 the Literary editor of 'The Times' began to review storytelling. Since then, two or three reviews or editorial features have appeared each year: a start.

<sup>4</sup> Some English and Welsh Arts Officers are, and have been exceptionally supportive, but as Literature Officers and Community Arts Development Officers, they are not particularly trained to look at storytelling. (In a way, expecting a Literature Officer - whose medium is the written and published word - to comment on the telling of traditional tales is like asking a Drama officer to comment on Puppetry, or a Painter to comment on Photography... Familiarity and a feel for the subject is demanded... Yet we mustn't forget that 'Traditional Narrative' is, willy nilly, part of the Literature Officer's brief: no-one can deny that a traditional storyteller sat at the cradle of every Literature in the world.) Part of this paper's original purpose was to advocate the appointment of people with specialized and sympathetic knowledge of the medium onto Arts panel advisory boards. Between 1996 and 2003 both West Midlands Arts and Southern Arts (two of the ten English Arts boards) took persons with special knowledge of storytelling onto their advisory panels – but in 2003 the Arts Council of England took the retrograde step of abolishing its advisory boards completely!

<sup>5</sup> I feel this statement should be qualified – during the mid to late '80's, I was involved with helping storytelling to find a place in Scottish education and with finding the Scottish Travellers an audience for their storytelling (as distinct from their ballad singing) outside of Scotland. However, since the inception of the Scottish Storytellers forum in 1992, I have only been North of the Border once and so no longer feel well enough informed to comment on the many exciting developments that seem to have taken place.

storytelling traditions. We distinguished them as 'The Fireside Tradition' and 'The Professional Tradition' – this seems obvious now, but then it was a revelation. Approaches to storytelling corresponding to these two traditions can be discerned in very many past and present world cultures. It is fairly easy to identify them in most urban/agricultural societies, and, by probing the sensitive margins of the secret and sacred they can also be found in hunter/gatherer societies. Where both exist they exist in parallel, yet they also co-habit, cross-fertilize and mutually support each other in an organic symbiosis.

The presence of two different traditions is also felt in the world of the contemporary 'Storytelling Revival' and we need to acknowledge that the existence of two traditions must have implications... As storytelling traditions try to re-create themselves and adapt themselves for survival in an aggressively literate and technologically mesmerized world, I've observed divisive tensions arise between storytellers and 'camps' of storytellers. Greater understanding is needed now of what is really happening in the world of the 'storytelling revival'. These tensions need to be acknowledged so that they don't lead to avoidable conflict. I'll introduce these two traditions in broad and general terms.

### **The Fireside Tradition**

I've called this 'the Fireside tradition',<sup>6</sup> and define it as 'the telling of traditional tales within a given community for entertainment and instruction'. The spectrum ranges from storytelling between generations within a family; storytelling as a public house pastime; travellers telling tales 'to shorten the road'; yarning at work and the 'moral instruction of the less experienced by the more experienced'. The fireside tradition is largely casual though there can be events which occasion something more formal such as during calendar festivals, and during rites of passage like weddings, namings and wakes. It seldom involves any financial gain for the storytellers and though it is thus amateur in the true meaning of the word, that is, 'done for love', it can most clearly involve skill and status. Within communities and families certain individuals can gain powerful reputations for their storytelling skills. To take a now historic example, in the Scottish and Irish Gaeltecht, the 'Seanachies' would make it their business to gather, preserve and transmit as much narrative material as they could. For such individuals, telling traditional tales was a fiery, fabulous, life consuming passion.

My experiences in rural central India in 1994, convinced me that anywhere in the world where there were, (and where there still are!), stable, traditional agrarian communities, (i.e. free from the ravages of urban industrialisation, catastrophe, war and oppressively righteous and censorial propagandas such as evangelism, fundamentalism, nationalism, communism etc), there would have been, (and still are!), vast repertoires of fireside tales. At the very least these would include nursery material, fables, jokes, folk tales, local legends, wonder tales, smatterings of epic and religious mythology. This was a repertoire shared by, held by, and available to, everyone in general. It was told competently by many and expertly by an acknowledged few.

### **The Professional Tradition**

By contrast, 'The Professional Tradition' of storytelling is immediately distinguished by an element of financial or life-supporting gain. Professional Storytellers work in two sets of circumstances that can be called, 'The Court' – i.e. for private patrons – and 'The Market', where any member of the public can listen to the teller but is expected to pay for the privilege.

Itinerant professional storytellers – and I also number praise singers, bards and minstrels in their company – would descend upon, or be summoned into, the stable communities mentioned above,

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<sup>6</sup> The editor of the SfS version of this talk suggested that 'Hearthside' might be a better term – having 'Heart', 'Earth' and 'Fire' in it – but for me 'Fire' seems to be the elemental source of energy at the back of everything, so I've reverted to using 'Fireside' as a preferred term. Also 'hearth' is a word slipping into disuse and I'm reluctant to use moribund vocabulary that could be construed as nostalgic or whimsical.

especially at times of festivity and celebration. They would either introduce new material or present familiar material with a superlative degree of technical prowess. The need for continued patronage guaranteed that quality entertainment was delivered to a well-storied audience. In discussing the aim of their work most of the professional storytellers that I've encountered would concur with the following words inscribed on the wooden boards *hanging on each side of the stage* in the storytellers' house of Yangzhou, one of the traditional strongholds of Professional Chinese storytelling:

'Past and present are related, advice is passed along/  
Good words to enlighten the world, instruction infused in amusement!' <sup>7</sup>

Throughout the world, professional storytellers undertake an extremely varied range of activities, which are often highly culturally specific. However it's possible to indicate at least six general factors they all hold in common.

- All professional storytellers undertake a sophisticated training in the skills of their trade.
- They are expected to be familiar with at least the whole of the 'Fireside' repertoire of their culture before they learn an additional repertoire that will give them access to their livelihood.
- They often play a musical instrument.
- They often have to sing the praises of their patron.
- They often lead a nomadic or peripatetic existence.
- They are often inspired by Muses or Spirits or else they are driven by Daemons.

### **Where the Traditions Meet**

The proper relationship between these differing traditions is one of reciprocal nourishment. It is in the home, 'at the knees of the Grandmother', that the future professional storyteller first encounters the material that may become a life's work. It is from the storytellers in the 'markets' and 'courts' that stories gradually seep into the Fireside repertoire:

'There was a storyteller in the market to day!'

'Did you hear anything good then?'

'Yes. There was once a king who had an advisor..... etc.'

'Hmmm. I like that. I must tell it to my cousin tomorrow.'

This mutual relationship binds both traditions together and ensures that the community 'pool' is well stocked with narrative material to draw on.

What is this material? Where did it come from?

### **The Origins Of Traditional Tales**

It is telling that 'traditional' and 'folk' arts are more or less scorned by both the critical media and the arts funding bodies in England. The processes of tradition in our society are at best damaged and obscured, if not utterly lost. We're no longer accustomed to their workings. Mrs Thatcher's Conservative government's use of the expression 'Traditional Values', (when in fact they meant nothing more substantial than the imagined values of the Victorian era), brought the word into disrepute. As a consequence, the concept of Tradition in the Contemporary Arts world is misunderstood and tragically undervalued. Traditional and Folk arts, if funded at all, are allocated money from marginal budgets with titles such as 'Cultural Diversity' and 'Community Arts' – gesture funds marked for peripheral causes rather than for the mainstream 'Art-with-a-capital-A'.

Since the Renaissance, the Western Artistic tradition has glorified the individual artist, valuing originality at all costs. The individual is the source of all creation rather than a Common Creative Spirit... We are conditioned to hold that good creation is unique creation, (with an occasional limited edition thrown in for good measure). In the field of narrative, the Author has Authority, the novel is nouvelle, copyright is

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<sup>7</sup> quoted by the superb Danish expert on Chinese traditions of professional storytelling, Vibeke Bordahl.

capital and plagiarism is abhorrent. The Oral teller of traditional tales is a re-cycler of old material and thus highly unfashionable. Storytellers are viewed with scepticism and, accordingly, little effort has been made to understand their art leaving it to be ignored, patronised or marginalised.

However, in cultures profoundly less centred around Ego and Personality than ours, the composers of the tales that have entered into tradition, launched them long ago knowing full well that their names would probably be forgotten and that hundreds of others would work with them, sometimes embellishing and refining them, at other times distorting them and betraying them. Those composers, with their Muses and Daemons, were generous in spirit, trusting that their successful creations, great and small, would live on; thriving because of the wondrous ability of humans to recognise, remember and exalt in stories that sound in them the bells – both large and small – of truth. Examine a selection of the first documented narratives of the world: The Mahabharata, The Mabinogion, The Eddas, The Torah, The Popul Vuh, The Odyssey, Sundiatta, The Tain, Gilgamesh... and it is clear they are all rooted in oral tradition (and many in spiritual tradition). Each one contains fabulous stories honed and developed by countless inspired individuals from original ideas of genius into Epic works of collective genius. Traditional tales have the possibility of genius in them and the task of the teller of those stories is to release that genius whether they are 4-minute trick tales or eighteen evening epics! I guess that, in the West, during the past 500 years, that generosity of creative spirit has been rendered mean by the profit opportunity proffered by the printing machine...

I would suggest that the majority of traditional tales emerged within the professional tradition (and some within 'Shamanic' or Ceremonial circumstances, but that is altogether another discussion). If one pauses to think what the absence of pen, paper and printing entails, it's quite clear that in all manner of societies specific individuals would have had to be selected and trained to remember the many diverse branches of narrative ranging from legal, genealogical and historical; to ceremonial, sacred and philosophical, as well as those which are for sheer pleasure, entertainment and diversion. It's not unreasonable to suggest that students undergoing such a demanding training would have eventually specialised in a specific branch according to their gifts and inclination. Common-sense also suggests that at all times, in every culture, there must have been some people blessed with a flair for originating narrative, and others who could interpret them well. In a pre-literate oral culture the imaginative equivalents of great and diverse literary talents – novelists, poets, biographers, historians, fantasists and playwrights: Marquez, Shakespeare, Calvino, Tolstoy, Austen, Le Guin, Conrad – you name them – would all have been classed under the generic term 'storytellers'. As would stand-up comics and comedians and those creative equivalents of the twentieth century's greatest storytellers: the filmmakers. To thrive, tradition requires originators, interpreters and innovators – all working for the ultimate benefit of future generations...

Such work can only appear and survive in a psychically sophisticated and communally supportive artistic climate.

The professional storyteller often held special status. The 'King's Storyteller', the Griot, was a fact in most preliterate Monarchic or Theocratic systems... And yet that status was perilous, 'One word out of place and it's straight back to the streets for you...'

Does all this have any bearing on storytelling practice on the island of Britain at the turn of the millennium?

## **PART TWO**

### **The Search for Authenticity in Storytelling**

At its best storytelling is concerned with authenticity in the experience of the moment. By authenticity I mean something that is recognised as corresponding to something true – causing those inner bells of 'truth' to resonate. Storytelling, as defined at the beginning of this document, can only occur live, in the

sharing of a story between its teller and the audience. Storytelling is the living dynamic between three elements – the story, the effort of its teller to breath life into it through sound, word and gesture and the responding, influencing audience. It is an interpretative improvisation which many people liken to Jazz – though a more accurate analogy would be with the improvisation based around given melodies that is common to many 'Eastern' musical traditions. Storytelling in performance is primordial, immediate, responsive theatre. In 1995, at a performance of 'The Three Snake Leaves' by the Company of Storytellers, a 'Distinguished Author' turned to one of our colleagues and asked, 'Who does their writing for them?' She did not realise that the storytellers do it all themselves, creating the immediate language of each performance anew before each audience, and that the underlying patterning evolves through a constant sharing with audiences. There are no pens; the writing is on the wind.

What is authentic in living oral traditions and in the renewed traditions? What is authentic in both?

Elements resembling the 'Fireside Tradition' can be more readily identified in revival storytelling in Britain than elements resembling the 'Professional Tradition', however both traditions make their presence felt, and both carry something authentic. What complicates things is that, if one wants to hear stories nowadays, more often than not, one has to pay – and payment belongs to the realm of the professional tradition. So, immediately, a major topic ripe for audience discussion presents itself: 'if I'm paying, what am I paying for?'

### **Glimpsing Authenticity in the Fireside Tradition**

In this cluster of islands on the Eastern side of the Atlantic, we are fortunate that a tiny handful of genuine bearers of Fireside traditions survive. However, given the evidence of their current repertoires, in comparison with repertoires that seemed available in Irish, in Ireland, sixty years go, few of those left correspond to anything like the Seanachies mentioned above. Yet something tangible and authentic remains, perhaps most famously within the Scottish traveller legacy transmitted by Duncan Williamson, the late Betsy Whyte, the Robertsons, the Stewarts and others. With the exception of Duncan Williamson, the prose narrative repertoire offered by these tellers is fairly rapidly exhausted, but they are all good, competent, enjoyable Fireside tellers, with striking personalities. They offer audiences a glimpse of a surviving repertoire and manner of storytelling that was probably common to a great many Scottish rural dwellers in the first half of this century. As audience members today, we pay them so we can savor something of 'yesterday' that is almost lost.

But we mustn't be mistaken, these are bearers of Fireside traditions performing a long way from their hearths and talking to an audience of strangers, (who don't even speak the same language). Placed on a Folk club stage, the legendary Betsy Whyte would stand, hands clasped before her like a schoolgirl performing an obedient recitation: she would charm her audiences... Beside a roaring fire, with a dram in one hand and a fag in the other, she was someone quite different. John Campbell, a Fireside storyteller and sheep farmer from South Armagh with a substantial repertoire of jokes and humorous anecdotes, has often, and publicly, railed against the artificiality of the stage compared with the warmth of his kitchen. One cannot deny that in going to a theatre to watch such storytellers, vague elements of voyeurism and nostalgia come into play. In truth, the genuine bearers of these traditions are best experienced by that blazing fire in a truly social situation: there, repertoire is revealed according to the flow of the evening and the exchange is based upon camaraderie rather than 'giving them their money's worth'. Duncan Williamson, a Scots traveller, who in 1985 was regularly telling hour long wonder tales in his home, confronted with a stage ten years later, tends to fall back now on a formulaic collection of proven jokes and ballads – some fairly sentimental. It is understandably easier for him to entertain large audiences of strangers with laughter and tears rather than rough magic. I'm not sure how wise it is for those of us who would be contemporary professional storytellers to use such wonderful beings as exemplars of a viable performance style.

Our storytelling revival has created a micro-economy where such bearers of genuine Fireside tradition find themselves on public stages because there are subsidised promoters, (I'm one of them), willing to

pay them a week's wages for two hours entertainment; because people, (also like me), are willing to pay for a glimpse of something rare from a bygone era. The lives of these storytellers have been altered by the arrival of a source of seemingly easy money... They've danced to the devil's tune – and why shouldn't they? The Trickster is the storyteller's God! But I recall with some unease a moment in 1986 when I took the singer, Robin Williamson, to meet Duncan Williamson for the first time, and Duncan, fortified by half a dozen tins of Tennants Super Lager, threw a copy of his second book into the fire, cursing that he wished he'd never let any of his stories be recorded, transcribed and published, and that he'd never become a performing storyteller. His life was now irredeemably changed and he wasn't sure if it was for the better...

### **Ambiguity in the Fireside Revival**

Where does this leave the would-be storyteller who is, as French Storyteller, Muriel Bloch, said at the Society for Storytelling's Inaugural gathering in 1993, 'orphaned to tradition' in childhood, yet is now surrounded by tradition actively reinventing itself?

Since 1989 there has been a vast increase in the number of monthly 'Storytelling Clubs' modelled on the Folk Club pattern – from 2 to more than 20<sup>8</sup> today in England alone. They have floor contributions and invited, occasionally paid, guests. There has also been a similar increase in the number of Folk Music and Dance festivals that now regularly include storytellers. This coincides with a huge increase in the number of those setting themselves up as 'professional storytellers'. I think that some of the tensions mentioned earlier arise inevitably from this sense of boom. Many people coming to storytelling have been inspired and influenced by others and various 'schools' of influence can be discerned. Then there are those who are frankly opportunist: we've all encountered the 'All-Round' Children's Entertainers whose desperate publicity flyers promise a Clown; a Juggler; a Conjuror; a Face Painter; a Party Gamester; a Poet; a Singer; a Songwriter and – Yippee! A new string to the bow – a Storyteller...! (Theme tune: Puff the Magic Dragon).

The previously mentioned dozen or so storytellers who initially pioneered the way for storytelling work in Schools, Libraries, Arts Centres and Theatres and who established the precedents for it being a paid – and therefore professional – activity, had little contact with the 'Folk Club and Folk Music Scene'. (Robin Williamson excepted)<sup>9</sup>. The Folk scene didn't really wake up to the storytelling revival until the late eighties when the folk performer, Taffy Thomas, unable to continue his life as a street entertainer because of a stroke, took to telling stories on that circuit. When it did wake up, it brought with it different values and priorities. The storytellers emerging from that ambience tended to model themselves directly on Fireside Storytellers or those who'd modelled themselves on Fireside Storytellers (such as Taffy Thomas), only vaguely aware that other approaches existed, working to entirely different ethos.

The Fireside ideal is to create a lively 'Ceilidh' atmosphere where anyone can *'tell a story, sing a sang, show yer bum or oot yer gang!'* When this works a terrific sense of communality can be summoned – making a community out of strangers. It can be highly convivial. Beer flows, there are many contributions, songs are sung, and music might be played... In rediscovering this old and natural way of spending time together, a spirited tradition has been renewed. (Though when it doesn't work it can be laboured and dull with no one daring to challenge the desperate 'bore from the floor's' public indulgence of a love of the sound of his or her voice).

From time to time, having had some apparent success in these clubs, maybe telling stories once a month for a year and perhaps having attended a 'weekend workshop' with a 'professional storyteller',

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<sup>8</sup> As of 2004, there seem to be about 54 such clubs at any one time

<sup>9</sup>For the record, I would name them as myself, Tuup, Daisy Keable, Helen East, Rick Wilson, Kevin Graal, Robin Williamson, Hugh Lupton, Roberto Lagnado, Beulah Candappa, Eileen Colwell and Grace Hallworth, (The last four being salaried teachers or Librarians) – I would be interested to hear of others who *in 1981* were being paid on a free-lance basis to tell traditional narratives in England, Scotland or Wales.

somebody decides this qualifies them too to advertise their services as a professional, (or 'semi-professional'), storyteller charging anything from £85.00 to £200.00 a day<sup>10</sup>... Which is fine – and there's a large unregulated market for their services in education...

But, the moment professional fees are being sought, that storyteller must accept that the rules of the game have completely changed. It is the patron's prerogative, I would even say obligation, to ask that storyteller: 'What am I paying for?' The following question was overheard at a folk festival. A punter had paid to watch a storyteller performing. He turned to his partner and said: 'with half an hour's preparation I could do what that person is doing. I've paid good money. I want to see someone doing something that I couldn't possibly do...'

Aye, and there's the rub.

In this country one group of people have been evolving a new Fireside tradition with an attitude that says anyone and every one can tell stories and should tell stories. Significant sums of 'Community Arts' funding flowed towards this during the eighties. At the same time, another group have been creating precedents for paying people to tell stories which, by the simplest definition, means they have been evolving a new 'professional tradition'. When these two efforts converge, as they must, they create a kind of hybrid. This new quasi-professional tradition pivots on a paradox: people are venturing into situations that demand the approaches and values of the professional tradition yet, more often than not, they are only equipped with the repertoire, vision and values of the Fireside tradition... The results can too often be disappointing. The quality of listening that storytelling demands is exceptional in our times. It requires an effort and I find it unforgivable that this effort be rewarded with mediocrity or something boring.

We really need to look at this.

It's not surprising that from about 1991 onwards, I regularly began to catch an anxious note in the conversations of long established storytellers whose livelihoods depend on the quality of their work – put bluntly, there was concern that: 'cowboys' with barely a week's 'Flying time' under their belt and a fistful of stolen stories, were 'pissing upstream'... Beyond that there was – and still is – a wider fear that, in the eyes of contemporary patrons, such as Arts Centre programmers, Head teachers and funding bodies, the art of paid storytelling itself was being brought into disrepute by amateurs posing as professionals...

We'd better take a closer look at what the professional tradition involves: first how it was, how it is in this revival and then how it could be.

### **Glimpsing Authenticity in the Professional Tradition**

Six factors more or less common to the genuine professional storytelling traditions of the world have already been listed. I'd like to go a little further into the first two of these, namely the matters of skills training and of repertoire; the rest will have to be saved for other discussions.

'All professional storytellers undertake a sophisticated training in the skills of their trade'. Let me define a skill as: 'a consciously undertaken activity, done in order to produce an intended result'. We can read, with awe, fragments of medieval manuscripts alluding to the training of the classical professional storytellers in Ireland – the 'filidh'. It seems reasonable to say that they were being trained in a mantic art – a magical alchemy of using image, word and sound to, literally, 'en-chant' their listeners. Many of their stories were therefore sacred. The training was rigorous, in 'colleges', and it lasted a dozen years. There was a syllabus that included learning several hundred basic stories and several hundred mythological ones. It included the learning of languages – not only in terms of differing tongues but also in terms of symbolic vocabularies. Obviously this was not something everyone could do, (and neither

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<sup>10</sup> In 2005, professional storytellers are charging between £200 & £350 per day.

would everyone want to do it!) It seems unlikely that similar schools with unbroken traditions remain anywhere in the world today. However not all is lost and one can learn something worthwhile from the surviving professional traditions of other cultures that may cast an oblique light on what might have gone on closer to home.

Séref Tasliova, an impressive Azeri Ashik from the Kars region of Eastern Turkey, featured in the 1989 UK International Storytelling Festival in London, told me that he thought about 60 true Ashiks remained in Turkey. He didn't know what the situation was behind the Soviet border.<sup>11</sup> Ashiks are Poets, Storytellers, Epic Singers and Praise Singers – the title means 'A Lover'. They accompany themselves on a stringed, long necked, lute-like instrument called the 'Saz'. Their tradition certainly has pre-Islamic precedents and what remains of their current tradition has discernible links with Sufism. (Modern Turkey's secular state has disrupted the patronage system and ended any possibility for those Ashiks who might have chosen to live as wandering Dervishes to do so). The contemporary Ashik's performance opportunities now seem generally restricted to performance at weddings or to competing in their own Skill contests. This is a predominantly male tradition, though there are a few women who perform in public as Ashiks. (However, as you will see, the ultimate custodians of the majority of the narratives in Turkey are the women, at home at by the hearth...)

We asked Séref about the training of the Ashiks. The tradition is passed on through an apprenticeship that lasts about seven years. It is the master's prerogative to select his apprentices from all those that approach him. In the first year the apprentice is taught the correct way to hold the instrument. Only in the second year is he taught to play it. And only after two years of learning the basic 120 tunes from which improvisation starts, is he allowed to start working with words and song. At a certain moment between five and seven years from the commencement of the training, the master will gently kiss the apprentice on his shoulder, signifying that the training is completed and the student can now go out and earn money. In return for all these years of teaching, his only payment to his master is a bolt of cloth, from which the master can make a new set of performance robes... Money is kept out of it and you can appreciate that the master has to be very serious about his choice of student. His investment in the student only pays dividends to the art and the tradition.

This gives an impression of the serious steps a living professional tradition takes to ensure that it is not debased. There are no longer any remotely comparable traditions in the West and there probably haven't been for several centuries.

So can anything be traced of the professional tradition in this revival?

Viewed from the outside, opportunities for professional engagement exist. 'The Court' is replaced by 'working to a patron's brief' – for example telling stories on historic sites, in a museum or in a school as part of a project or fair. Ticketed events in Arts Centres and Literature festivals, etc which are open to the public, correspond to the new 'Market'.

But, who's kidding who? These are only external points of comparison. Professional storytellers raised in living traditions are capable of extraordinary feats of technical skill. I've watched Ashiks competing to compose spontaneous verse in perfect metre and rhyme on subjects given by the audience, with two-inch needles placed between their lips to reduce the available vocabulary! I've listened to a Gujerati praise singer consciously bringing energy to his voice, *chakra* by *chakra*, as the emotion of a story intensified. I've watched a sixteen-year-old Pandvani singer make 3,000 villagers follow her improvised songs, through the epic twists and turns of the Mahabharata. I've watched a Chinese woman strike a

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<sup>11</sup> Since this was written, evidence has emerged that there are a small number of Ashiks in Azerbaijan but their repertoire is diminished. Stalin, during the grotesque forced 'Atheisation' of the Soviet Union, from the Caucasus to Siberia, gave specific orders for the systematic extermination of hundreds of thousands of Epic Singers, Shamans, Healers, Dervishes and other 'Men and Women of High Degree' – judged as being intellectuals or members of 'privileged élites'. Ronald Hutton writes about this in 'Shamans Siberian Spirituality and the Western imagination', Hambledon and London, 2001

drum in such a way that your mind cannot wander<sup>12</sup>. I've listened to the Manding Griot's kora conjure up the shimmering armour of a distant army. I've heard a Rajasthani 'Pabuji' storyteller's wife sing long lines of narrative, warding off barrenness and encouraging fertility, as she held an oil lamp to illumine the secret details of a scroll painting in the desert under stars – a primal dramatic effect that could reach back to the paintings in the caves at Lascaux...

We have absolutely no comparable skills or knowledge.

We have no living masters.

For those in post-industrial societies who would call themselves Professional storytellers everything has to be rediscovered or invented anew.

The traditions I've spoken of flourished, and survive, in rural and pre-industrial societies, so we are obliged to try and understand why the telling of traditional tales is making a comeback in an urbanised, post-industrial society. Who are these new storytellers? What stories are they telling and why? Who are their audiences? What is behind this phenomenon? These are questions worthy of future exploration. These are also topics ready for students of contemporary folklore to set about researching.

All this immediately presents us with two practical questions: 'What technical skills could and should professional storytellers reasonably be looking to develop in Britain today?' and 'What talents should be subjected to critical evaluation?' It is worth remembering that in other established interpretative art forms, such as Ballet or Classical Music, it is immediately and painfully evident if someone has been trained in their skill and whether they have talent or not and mercifully for the audiences, such artists have to compete in auditions to gain employment... If those of us actively involved with rediscovering and reinventing the telling of traditional tales do not identify areas of technical skill to experiment with, research and develop soon, the audiences will sense complacency and drift away with the impression 'The Storytelling Revival' isn't going anywhere.

On the back of this sits a third set of question: Where will the financial support for active research and development come from? Who are the friends of this Art? Who are going to be its public advocates? Who is qualified to speak for it in the corridors of power?

## **PART THREE**

### **A Way Forward in the Light of Two Traditions**

#### **Appropriate Repertoires**

Before we can look to developing skills, we have to ask which stories require what skills? We must look briefly at the question of repertoire in Tradition and in Revival.

In traditional cultures the professional storyteller is expected to be familiar with at least the whole of the Fireside repertoire of their culture before they learn the additional repertoire that will give them access to their livelihood.

When asking Séref Tasliova where he heard most of his stories for the first time, he replied: 'From my Grandmother.' One of the pioneers of the French storytelling revival, Abbi Patrix, pointed out that a revival storyteller is, vis à vis repertoire and skill, about twenty-five years behind a storyteller born into a tradition. This means that if a traditionless revival storyteller becomes interested in stories for the first time at, say, twenty-five years old, then a frantic search begins as he or she, hunts for stories to form a

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<sup>12</sup> Since this was written I've also witnessed several Kyrgyz, Manaschi, visibly engaging with spirits who were indicating what should be sung.

basic repertoire. Someone born in a tradition already has those stories, they've heard them all their life. At twenty five, the one born in a tradition who desires to become a professional storyteller, if not already apprenticed, is busy trying to get apprenticed to some one who will teach them the technical skills and a repertoire appropriate to offer strangers in 'court' and 'market'.

The professional storyteller in a tradition was expected to tell the whole Fireside repertoire at least as well as the best Fireside tellers, and then tell something else besides. In many cultures this additional material is Epic, Heroic and Mythological. It is material for large audiences, material that turns around enormous passions, material that demands to be sung, material that is worthy of the fantastic skills listed earlier. I would say that in practice such material is almost psychically, and even physically, too powerful and formal for a casual Fireside Ceilidh in a public house. (Which isn't to say it can't be performed there – but there also need to be other more focussed, dedicated venues for its performance).

### **What Really Happens In Revival Storytelling?**

In order to pursue the question of which skills contemporary storytellers need to develop now, we need to take a long, hard look at what actually happens when modern storytellers take the floor...

Many of us 'revival' storytellers have now been fortunate to spend varying degrees of time in the company of genuine bearers of both traditions. We may have had inspiring experiences which have radically altered our perceptions of our chosen art, but, in the light of the above, it would be hubristic, (and naïve), to claim that we actually have the support of any tradition. We might have had the fortune to meet Betsy Whyte, and in her honour we might tell a story that she told, but we cannot *be* Betsy Whyte. We have neither lived her life – nor can we pretend *not* to have lived our own lives. It would be useless, (and even insulting), for us to try to copy her. Authenticity does not lie in poor imitations of external forms

I suggest that we revival storytellers be wise and come clean, openly admitting to not having much of a storytelling tradition. However I did mention that the Trickster is the Storyteller's God and the Trickster has just reminded me that, if we don't have a storytelling tradition, neither does our audience! This is both fortunate and unfortunate. We benefit in that our audiences are often hearing wonderful material for the first time yet we also miss something because they lack critical points of reference. Unless we grasp the significance of an audience's lack of tradition, we run the risk of getting a distorted view of our own talent. If we are working with an audience that consists largely of those who have never been to a storytelling event before, the audience will probably be impressed and have an enjoyable time... With any luck their minds might even get blown! But, we must be clear why...

Generally, the first thing to strike an audience new to storytelling is their own listening. For many people listening in such a sustained way and marvelling at the fantastical images that are playing in their own imaginations is something they've not experienced much since childhood: 'Poor man's cinema' is a strong experience! After this they are caught by the unfamiliarity of the tales. A traditional narrative will rarely fail as long as the teller is enthusiastic about it and the events are clearly expressed. (But that's not to say that good stories can't be wrecked by poor storytellers...) On the whole, the audience is carried by the joy and interest of 'what happens next'. Let's be very clear, the story is doing most of the work here. Only thirdly do the storyteller's personal qualities, skills and talents come into play. I've noticed that even fairly experienced storytellers like myself can be deluded, mistakenly attributing too much of the effect they are having to something they are doing themselves...

### **The Work of a Storyteller: Approaches to Development and Appraisal**

I think it is important to stress that the storytelling revival in Britain had its temporal genesis in an urban environment. It arose as a response to late 20th Century yearnings for cultural roots, for continuity and for communication in direct and humane ways. I've already said that most of the pioneers of the

storytelling revival at the start of the eighties had very little contact with the 'Folk Scene' and with rural working conditions. Those first revival storytellers were drawn from three professional backgrounds – literature, drama and education. Most of them created the opportunity to work in inner city schools as support for a developing multi-cultural curriculum and this gave the revival its economic base. Theatre-in-Education and the work of librarians opened the door to that world. This meant that right from the start there was, in their view, a concern for word and language, dramatic presentation and an international, multi-cultural repertoire. It also ensured that a basic degree of professional competence was demanded. We were beginners then, and if, as Abbi Patrix says, we're always a generation behind tradition, we're still beginners – but no longer 'absolute beginners...'

So, here, let me finally suggest some areas of technical skill that would benefit from active research and development through experimentation so that the revival of paid storytelling can grow. These proposals are made in the hope that if the standard of revival Professional storyteller's work improves, it may also feed and influence the work of Fireside storytellers everywhere.

And what again is the work of a storyteller? Storytelling is an interpretative improvisation; it is Jazz; it is primordial, immediate responsive Theatre. Whether working in the Fireside or Professional tradition, the storyteller is simultaneously, Author/Adapter, Performer and Director of his or her work. For a tradition undergoing renewal this immediately suggests at least three areas of skill to develop. These could also be the focus for critical appraisal:

### **1. The Work of the Author/Adapter/Composer**

The choice of story reveals a lot about a storyteller. We could say that thanks to fourteen years of full-blown storytelling revival, Britain has now been refurbished with the beginnings of a functional British Fireside repertoire. (It would include stalwart folk tales such as: 'The Man Without A Story', 'Jack And Mary And The Landlord', 'The Cook And The Ducks', 'The Pickpocket', and 'The Cow That Ate The Piper'; Wonder Tales such as 'The Juniper Tree' and 'The Black bull of Norraway', and fragments of epic such as 'The Marriage of Sir Gawain', 'The Birth of Taliesin' and 'Fionn and the Old Man's Hut' etc. There is also a healthy familiarity with figures from international folklore – such as Nasrettin Hodja, Ananse, Baba Yaga, Raven, Birbal, Abu Nowas, Coyote...etc.) However, if this is representative of the core of the new Fireside repertoire, a professional needs to know much more.

Deserving the highest respect and encouragement are those storytellers who are not complacent about their repertoires and who are actively scouring their own, as well as the world's, common traditions to bring fresh ancestral material forward to restock our collective Ocean of Story.

The Irish 'fili' talked of 'harmonising and synchronising' their material – and the subtle 're - creational' work of finding and shaping stories, liberating them from the confines of dusty volumes, reveals a great deal about the creative talents of a revival storyteller. This authorship work, the inventive re-cladding, re-working, re-locating and re-patterning of a tale is the skill that most clearly distinguishes a storyteller from an actor and – dare I say it – a thief.

The ability to use considered and precise language in the full flight of improvisation is another great skill. How does a revival storyteller use words? Is there a musicality to the piece? Does the piece have rhythm? Is it set rigid and mechanical or is it fluid and alive? Is it responsive to the immediate moment? Does it have spontaneity?

All this is the work of the author/adapter/composer within the storyteller.

### **2. The Work of the Performer**

Does the teller make use of the tools of inflection, tone, pitch and tempo? Is the teller aware of what his or her body is doing? How does gesture, bearing and stance affect the drama of the occasion? Is the

narrative supported by the body? Does the storyteller understand the significance of what anthropologists call, physical co-presence?

### **3. The Work of the Director**

Does the storyteller turn the space he or she is performing in to their advantage? Are they alive to the audience? Are they awake to the demands of the moment? How skilfully do they reveal the story? Can they play? How quick is their timing?

In fact these are all questions that a Theatre Director would ask. The delivery of a tale, once chosen by an individual, is, I re-assert, a dramatic art... And many skills and techniques are involved. This has serious implications for both the public presentation of storytelling, its future funding and its means of development.

I believe that only if storytellers and their audiences, (which also includes folklorists, funders and field workers), ask such implicitly critical questions will we discover the secrets about stories and their telling that our forebears certainly knew. Significant revelations have already come to light. For example, it is becoming evident that certain stories involving word play and difficult structures had a double function as training games and exercises for storytellers (for example, the international folktale known as 'The Cow on the Roof', in which a husband and wife swap roles, is not only a list exercise setting up chain of consequences but it is also a fiendish exercise for developing consistent spatial awareness). Vergine Gulbenkian discovered an Armenian cumulative tale, the final line of which was a breath control exercise. Bruno de la Salle, director of the French, 'Centre Pour La Literature Orale' made the stunning observation that the principle reason that professional storytellers the world over use musical instruments is to give the body something to do... (That is not an obvious observation)

If anyone wants to see hope for the authentic western revival of a professional storytelling tradition then make an effort, go to France and follow the sophisticated theatre work that Abbi Patrix and his Compagnie du Cercle are doing on movement, rhythm, tone and pitch.

### **Conclusion**

So, in bringing this overview to a close I would summarise by saying that the growth of Ceilidh storytelling clubs means that there are increasing opportunities for us to revel in a rich and expanding Fireside repertoire and to also familiarise ourselves with the rules of the storytelling game. But, if we want to hear and tell epic myths – stories that are intended for large public audiences and stories that demand a more concentrated atmosphere than a bar room can provide – we have to continue for many more years the humble and hard work of developing the skills and knowledge to serve them. At the same time we have to campaign hard for appropriate levels of funding to do this – otherwise we risk rendering majestic material mundane and even banal.

All this is said from a sincere love of stories and storytelling – what I've called 'Poor Man's Cinema'.

Each day I wonder at this gift prepared so generously for us by our ancestors. Stories are told to entertain and instruct, but their telling is always dependent on an interpreter: they live differently in different individuals according to the individual's understanding of them. My hope is that revival storytellers in both traditions will become more self critical, more demanding of themselves and of others too, and openly seek out and welcome critical voices. More than forty questions have been aired in this unwieldy document; wade through it again to find them. I urge you to debate them with spirit, challenge my assumptions and assertions and act on your conclusions. I also hope that as audiences become more aware of the magnitude of the art of telling traditional tales, they will become more discerning in how they spend their time and their money. I hope they will make efforts to seek out the best stories being told by the best storytellers wherever they may be – whether it's in the court, in the market or by the fire – and that those efforts will be duly and magnificently rewarded.

# Appendix

## Data Concerning Contemporary Oral Storytelling in the UK

### Source

These key findings are drawn mainly from an informal survey of professional storytelling in England and Wales carried out by Ben Haggarty between September 2003 and April 2004. The complete 84-page report, \* 'Memories and Breath', can be downloaded by following the link from: <http://sfs.org.uk/>

### Oral Literature

Human beings have been telling stories for far, far longer than they have been writing them. The resulting body of *oral literature* is comprised of commonly and communally owned narratives and sources of verbal delight. If it is not the primal, primary and central form of 'live' literature, what is?

The repertoire of oral literature is oceanic. It includes: anecdotes, reminiscences, family legends, gossip, rumours, hearsay, yarns, one-liners, jokes, jests, turns, rozzums, teasers, crack, patter, monologues, disaster jokes, boasts, lies, cock and bull, tall stories, urban legends, conspiracy theories, ghost stories, sightings, nightmares, dreams, visions, prophesies, nursery tales, nonsense stories, shaggy dogs, folk tales, trickster tales, cautionary tales, old wives tales, parables, moral tales, fairy tales, aetiology, legends, history, romances, sagas, epics, myths, sacred tales, creation myths, superstitions, proverbs, nursery rhymes, playground rhymes, clapping songs, skipping songs, drinking songs, rugby songs, rounds, ballads, chants, prayers, spells, ceremonial oratory, and more... In fact the term covers all the forms of formal and formulaic spoken word – (as well as intoned, chanted and sung word) – that can be borrowed, recreated and reshaped to be passed on to be passed on. Oral literature has held an enduring appeal since humanity evolved speech and its repertoire thrives on community and continuity. This popular, accessible and transmissible material penetrates the imagination, feeding it to such an extent that it can linger for a lifetime in the mind, binding generations and bonding peers. Certain core aspects could even be said to form the archaic DNA of the imagination and, like DNA, are subject to constant evolution, adaptation and renewal. In the hands of inspired artists who know how to hone it, oral literature has evolved a cutting edge sharp enough to cut through the transient fashions of time. The majority of the narrative forms of oral literature come under the generic category of 'traditional tales'.

### \* Number of Storytellers in Britain and Northern Ireland

In December 2004 'Cybermouth' compiled as comprehensive a list of full-time and part-time professional storytellers as possible. It puts the figure of artists working in England at 275; in Wales at 34; in Scotland at 93; a further 25 work in Northern Ireland. The combined UK total currently stands at 427 storytellers at least.

### \* Storyteller's Repertoire

The major part of 90% of professional storytellers' repertoire consists of traditional tales.

### \* Storyteller's Workload

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\* *The report was based on data returned by 38 out of 100 storytellers contacted in England and Wales. The main finding (that the workload of professional storytellers averages 106 events per year) was re-circulated to the original 100 and replies from a further 22 respondents confirmed that this average is consistent with experience. This brings the percentage of respondents involved with the survey process to 60%. Academics have confirmed that these statistics can be considered robust.*

Professional storytellers undertake an average of 106 engagements per year reaching an average audience of 9,161 people, in other words just over two events per week reaching 86 persons per event.

#### \* **The Scale of Professional Storytelling**

Combining these averages with the numbers of storytellers charging for their services reported by the Cybermouth survey, the national UK scale of this art form *may possibly* be: **45,262** storytelling events per annum reaching **3.9 million people**. (427 x 106 & 427 x 9,161)

#### \* **The range and profile of Storytelling Activity**

52% of the storytelling work is educational and a further 14% is in targeted community contexts. This means that 66% (2/3rds) of storytelling engagements are closed to the general public, they are hidden and therefore *invisible*. The public have access to the remaining 34% of the events, however the survey revealed that less than a quarter of these public events are marketed in a way that gives the presence of storytellers any public visibility, in more than three quarters of the public events the storytellers are just one component amongst many in jamboree programmes of events.

#### \* **Support for Storytelling by Literature Development Workers**

1% of the total activity in England is the result of partnerships with literature development workers/officers.

#### \* **Work in Education**

Professional storytellers are doing an average of 55 schools/library events per year and an average of 117 under 18's are being reached per event or engagement. 90% of this educational work is in *primary* education and therefore for children up to and including age 11. The rest is for secondary aged pupils.

#### \* **Work in the Community**

Professional storytellers are doing an average of 16 community events per year. An average of 28 people are being reached per community event/engagement. Most of this work is with precisely targeted groups and is developmental in nature – either skills sharing/workshopping or facilitating narrative exchanges.

#### \* **Work accessible to the General Public**

Professional storytellers are doing an average of 37 public events per year attended by an average audience of 62 people per public event. A fifth of these take place in publicly visible arts centres. Just over a quarter of these events are site-specific projects – complementing exhibitions in art galleries, museums, environmental centres, heritage sites, etc. The remainder are in festivals, libraries, village halls and clubs.

#### \* **Adult access to Storytelling**

41% of the publicly accessible storytelling is for adult audiences. 59% is for families and children.

#### \* **Adult Storytelling Clubs**

At the time of the survey there were 54 monthly adult storytelling clubs in England, each putting on an average 10 events per year; most feature a mixture of 'floor spots' and paid guest artists. They attract on average 45 people per event.

✳ **Urban/Rural Ratios**

37% of the total storytelling work is in inner city areas; 34% is in small towns and suburban areas; 27% of the work is in rural areas.

✳ **Storytelling in purpose built performance spaces**

Only 3.9% of the *total* storytelling work is in purpose built public performance venues (arts centres or theatres). 73% of that work is for adults.

✳ **Storytelling in Festivals**

There are at least five long-established annual storytelling festivals attracting audiences numbering thousands. Twice as many adult storytelling performances occur in general arts festivals as occur in specific literature festivals.

✳ **Community Storytellers**

The ratio of 'community storytellers' to professional and part time storytellers in Scotland is about 9 – 1. That is, for every storyteller in Scotland for whom storytelling is a primary paid activity, there are 9 other librarians, environmental workers, teachers, heritage workers, etc. using stories in their work – and engaging with the Scottish Storytelling Centre. If this ratio holds true for the rest of the UK, then (again using the Cybermouth figure of 427 storytellers) the extended nationwide range of 'community storytellers' could number as many as **3,843**. (427 x 9)