

Introduction

John Randall

The School of Scottish Studies came into being at the University of Edinburgh in 1951 as a research unit dedicated to ‘the study and conservation of the folk culture of Scotland’ when Professor Angus McIntosh was enabled to turn a vision which he and others had long held into reality. In that year Calum Iain Maclean was seconded from the Irish Folklore Commission to continue his collecting in Scotland, while other pioneers such as Hamish Henderson and Alan Lomax were also beginning the monumental task of systematically recording the rich oral culture of Scotland in Scots and Gaelic. The School of Scottish Studies Archives, now located in Celtic and Scottish Studies at Edinburgh University, continue as a dynamic and inspiring resource for all with an interest in Scotland and her cultural heritage, a treasure-house of sound recordings and photographs from Shetland to the Borders, from the Western Isles to Buchan, supported by an outstanding research library and other materials.

The contributions brought together in this volume are based on talks given at a conference organised by the Islands Book Trust in association with the University of Edinburgh in August 2011 to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the School. This was an appropriate time to look back on, review, and assess the unique contribution made by the School of Scottish Studies to our knowledge and understanding of Scotland. The conference attracted an exceptional array of first-class speakers, many of whom worked for or have been closely associated with the School over the years. The conference looked at some of the pioneers who are no longer with us, as well as reflecting on other key figures who played a seminal role in the history of the School. We were joined by scholars from outwith Scotland, placing the School’s work in a wider international Celtic and Nordic context, and helping us to evaluate critically the significance of the School’s work and history.

It was particularly fitting that the conference took place in Shetland in 2011, a year of national celebration of the culture of Scotland's islands. I believe that the islands of Scotland have contributed disproportionately to the history, literature, and heritage of Scotland. The islands seem to have generated more than their fair share of characters and tradition bearers. One can speculate as to why this should be the case, based on geography, a sense of distinctiveness, and perhaps an element of protection from modernising and homogenising cultural forces, but the archives of the School – whether in Gaelic, Scots, or English – appear to give this claim some support.

Like all Book Trust events, the conference was not only an 'academic' occasion. We pride ourselves in bringing people together from a range of different backgrounds on the principle that we can all learn from each other's perspectives, and that a mixture of backgrounds adds to the enjoyment of the occasion. We also believe there are great advantages in holding conferences in a community setting, with active participation by local people. So most sessions took place in the Islesburgh Complex of community facilities in the heart of Lerwick. In addition to the more formal talks, there was a visit to the wonderful Shetland Museum and Archives, and a ceilidh featuring the live traditions of Shetlandic music, stories, and songs. We also used the occasion of the conference to launch a new book by Christopher Mylne about his memories of living in Foula in the 1950s, and a small group of us went on to spend a few days in Foula following the conference in the company of Chris and his family.

I should like to thank everyone who made the conference and this splendid volume of papers possible. First, our funders: Scotland's Islands, Awards for All, LEADER Innse Gall, HIE, and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. Second, all those who helped in the organisation, particularly Margaret Mackay, former Director of the School and of its Archives, Shetland Amenity Trust, the catering and technical staff at the Islesburgh Complex, the late Elma Johnson, Donald Murray, Louise Scollay, and our own staff and Trustees, particularly Alayne Barton, Margaret Macdonald, and Donnie Morrison. Third, all those who have worked in the School of Scottish Studies over the decades, including figures of national and

international stature described in these pages, some sadly no longer with us. And finally, all our speakers and contributors, from Iceland and the USA to Ireland and various parts of Scotland, to Bob Chambers who ably edited this volume, and to all those who attended and participated in the conference from Shetland and all over the world.

What comes out of this volume most strikingly for me is that the wonderful range of material collected, preserved, and disseminated by the School of Scottish Studies over 60 years often has the deepest local roots yet is simultaneously of national and international significance. The work of the School has both helped to validate and encourage local cultures, and has also had a profound impact on Scotland's cultural and political development. Moreover, the heritage and history which we celebrate in this volume is a living tradition, as amply demonstrated by the conference ceilidh, which brought together Shetland musicians and story-tellers of all generations. The carrying stream flows on, and long may it continue to deepen, broaden, and inspire.

John Randall, Chairman, the Islands Book Trust
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