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Mr James Boyle
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11 OCT 2004

Dear James Boyle

Scotland's Cultural Future?

This is a personal response to your open letter of the 24 August 2004, in which you ask for the views of university and college staff on Scotland's cultural future.

I am Director of the Elphinstone Institute at the University of Aberdeen, where our remit is to research, record and promote the language, culture and traditions of the North and North-East of Scotland. We take all these aspects very seriously, including the latter function. As there are only two of us who work full time (my secretary and myself), our activity has to be very carefully considered and targeted. For that reason, most of our successful projects are undertaken in partnership with other organisations. Funding has had to be sought for other staff who have worked in the Institute during the past five years.

What is special about the culture we seek to promote? Essentially it is the culture that is valued by 'ordinary' people – we call it vernacular culture – as distinct from the 'recognised' culture of the theatre, opera, classical concert, ballet, art gallery, etc. In the first instance, it is the spoken word or local tongue (the Doric) that identifies North-East speakers. Here we work in schools, with the education service, and other community groups to encourage its use and give speakers and local writers in Scots confidence in their mother tongue and make resources freely available (see the Elphinstone Kist at www.abdn.ac.uk/elphinstone).

The song, music, and storytelling that is a part of the North-East culture is similarly encouraged. For example, in partnership with RSAMD we held a festival last year with two concerts, talks, and over twenty workshops devoted to small free-reed instruments, such as mouth organs, melodeons and concertinas. Apart from the success of the event, a number of expert local instrumentalists were given confidence and a chance to have their talents widely recognised and appreciated. Nothing quite like this has ever happened before in Scotland.

We also organise an annual singing weekend on a local heritage farm to which people come from near and far, not just to listen but to participate. This year, out of an audience of 130 almost half sang (solo). Such events are never parochial or insular, but present the best of local culture alongside guests from England, Ireland and elsewhere. We firmly believe that everyone should be part of such a cultural experience at whatever level they feel confident. Extraordinary talents and skills are to be found among 'ordinary' people.

In Peterhead and the village of Boddam, a skill of model boat building (fifies or herring luggers), dates back over a hundred and fifty years. 'Boaties', as they are known, are built in wood with great skill and traditional knowledge, and sail without a motor or radio control. Yet this remarkable local art/craft has never been acknowledged or acclaimed beyond the local area. Our craft residency this summer (in partnership with Aberdeenshire Council) has successfully trained sixteen apprentices (six under 18 years of age), created wide interest (visitor numbers to Peterhead Maritime Heritage Centre have greatly increased), and significant goodwill (reflected in the local sponsorship, media coverage, etc). This too has not been simply a local affair and links have been established with Swedish builders of traditional model sailing craft (Uddevalla). Moreover, an exhibition over the next two years will tour throughout the UK and Scandinavia featuring the boatie building skill and the craft residency.

Our work with Scottish Gypsy Travellers, 'The Oral and Cultural Traditions of Scottish Travellers' largely funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, is a further example of the way in which we support and promote the culture of a minority group of Scotland's people, who rarely if ever feature in the context of arts and heritage. As a demonstration of our confidence in the great significance of Traveller culture, the project is headed by a Traveller – Stanley Robertson – who is one of Scotland's foremost storytellers and ballad singers. Part of his brief is to visit schools to raise awareness among pupils and staff of the considerable contribution that Travellers have made and still make to Scotland's heritage and tradition (over 120 visits to date). This culture is a classic example of what UNESCO has recognised as intangible cultural assets.

As you would expect, we also teach, research, archive, and publish in the field of Scottish ethnology.

Working with tradition and in partnership with local people ensures that our activities have grass roots support and a meaningful dialogue/relationship is established between the community and the university. Under such conditions mutual respect flourishes.

Below are a few thoughts in response to the First Minister's challenge and your letter:

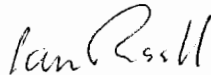
- We should value traditional vernacular culture (folk arts) alongside high art forms. This will ensure a greater democratic involvement in the nation's cultural activity.
- We should keep faith with past tradition. We have a hugely valuable legacy. This is not to deny creativity. Burns, himself, was a creative genius, whose art grew from vernacular culture and he was a great champion of it.
- We should seek to value and promote Scotland's diverse cultural traditions, not simply the tartan, heather, pipes and whisky of the stereotype, but the Gaelic psalm singers from Lewis, Puirt-a-Beul (mouth music) of the West, the fishermen's flute bands of the North-East, the Sanquhar knitters of the borders, the boat builders of Fair Isle, etc., etc. (such an inspired agenda was adopted by the Smithsonian Institution for their Folklife Festival in Washington DC in 2003, 'Scotland at the Smithsonian'.) (I will ask Dr Nancy Groce to send you a copy of their book.)
- Access to such cultural traditions, including of course Scots/Gaelic language and writing in Scots/Gaelic, should be an entitlement of young people in full time education in Scotland, not as a burden to an overworked teaching force, but as an enhancement (appropriately funded) drawing on local, regional, and national expertise and creative talent.

- The nurturing of the young, notably in traditional music and song as at centres of excellence – Plockton and RSAMD – should be widened to ensure that not just the ‘elite’ students benefit.
- We should build on existing strengths and not attempt to create something where nothing exists. The exciting creative surge in piping – Border, smallpipes, kitchen piping, etc – has come about because of, not in spite of, the great expertise and high standards of military and competitive piping. The popularity of and enthusiasm for learning the clarsach demonstrates both creative potential and a strong base in tradition.
- Diversity and inclusion can only work if Scotland’s minorities have a voice and are part of the process, ‘indigenous’ culture should be encouraged alongside newer ‘exotic’ forms. There is no such thing as ‘purity’ in traditional arts, and ‘authenticity’ is a judgement that should be reserved for the performers themselves and their own communities. The case here is for vernacular culture, ‘intangible assets’, oral tradition, minority traditions, ‘low-status’ as distinct from ‘high-status’ arts. The watchwords are ‘good faith’, ‘respect’, ‘partnership’, ‘outward looking’, ‘diversity’, and ‘championing’.

Exciting creative developments will arise where there is no great burden of expectation, where the periphery and middle ground, as well as the centre is nourished, where culture is enabled at the grass roots not the subject of dictates from on high, where education is enthused and not lumbered. A thriving culture needs to have a solid traditional base. It is about creating a climate, nurturing talent, creating opportunity, giving experiences, celebrating distinctiveness, and welcoming and valuing diversity. We need to recognise, respect and trust the practitioners and ‘doers’. Vernacular culture should be awarded the same priority that, in the past, has been the sole reserve of ‘high arts’.

The University of Aberdeen through the Elphinstone Institute has provided a model of how such an approach can and does work.

Yours sincerely



Dr Ian Russell
Director