Ack by letter 18/10/05

21

Inverewe House,
Poolewe,
Wester Ross IV22 2LG

24 NOV 2004

13th October, 2004

Dear Mr. Boyle,

Thank you so much for inviting the general public to comment on Scotland's current cultural provision and to make suggestions for the future, through the pages of the Ross-shire Journal of 24th September, 2004. I hope this submission isn't too late: what with mulling over how to reply (the more I think about it, the more culture seems to be intertwined with, for example, education and tourism), and our old computer crashing a couple of times, it's taken me much longer than I had anticipated. Having stayed in Blinkbonny, near Currie, about six miles south-west of Edinburgh, for eleven years, and Wester Ross for the last three, I have two rather different views on arts provision in Scotland. Well, here goes...

At the risk of sounding complacent, most aspects of the arts seem to be well-catered for in Edinburgh. In fact, having heard someone on Good Morning Scotland only last week agonizing over whether the several art galleries in Edinburgh should be run by the same organization, I realized that I must get my skates on and write to you. Worrying over art galleries when we barely get to see small-scale theatre amply illustrates the gulf between arts provision in Scotland's cities and that in remote rural areas. Now, of course, we could kick ourselves for not indulging in what was on offer in Edinburgh even more than we managed to (with two young daughters and just the one average salary). One of the most pressing problems was the woeful provision of night buses

between the city and Currie and Balerno and the long walk for little legs between some of the concert halls (Queen's Hall in particular) and a bus stop on our route. Perhaps this has improved since 2001, but before then there wasn't a viable alternative to taking the car and the attendant hassle of finding a parking space.

In the late 1970s I was able to get an unsold seat on the night at the Usher Hall and Queens Hall for £1 and 85p respectively on production of my NUS card. I do hope that a similar scheme still operates – it was such good value that I attended many more concerts than I would have done at full-price and could afford to be more adventurous.

In the late 1990s we took our young daughters to Christopher Bell's children's concerts at the Festival Hall. We all thoroughly enjoyed these – especially on a dreich winter's afternoon, and were grateful for the "family friendly" ticketing policy. However, it strikes me that it would be a greater challenge to take this audience on longer and more complex musical explorations as it matures. Nothing is offered for older children and teenagers (and nothing at all outside Edinburgh and Glasgow?).

The "proper" Edinburgh Festival was too expensive for the likes of us and the Fringe was, quite frankly, a bit overwhelming: something I sampled in my student days in the late 1970s, but we never got the hang of it as a family. By the time we left Blinkbonny, Edinburgh was a very expensive city and tickets for Fringe events reflected this. There is so much on offer but so little "quality control" that we chickened out of risking the housekeeping on a rotten evening's entertainment (and, of course, the almost inevitable trek across Edinburgh). It goes without saying that, conversely, we must have missed many stimulating and entertaining shows. The Book Festival was a different matter entirely – I could have camped out in Charlotte Square Gardens for the duration of this in its early days, but again, it became too expensive: I seem to remember around £8 for an hour-long "audience", under canvas, with a writer. We could enjoy a whole

evening of, say, Dougie Maclean at Howden Park in Livingston, for that! Even less helpful was the scrapping of family tickets, but perhaps this policy has been reversed since 2001. Other families evidently felt the same: Helen Dunmore delivered an excellent talk to a dismally small band of children. Furthermore, I was baffled by the lack of interplay between the Book Festival and local schools. Sure, the timing of the Festival is a little inconvenient, coinciding with the new academic year, but surely events for schools could be arranged before the summer holiday? Again, perhaps this has improved since we left the area.

Staying to the west of the city, we probably used Howden Park as much. We liked the wee auditorium there and parking was easy and the tickets cheap. A free newsletter kept us informed of future concerts: folk music was especially well-represented. We're not a particularly "switched-on" family, so it came as a surprise that none of our Edinburgh friends had been to Howden Park before we took them along. Scope for better communication between the City of Edinburgh and Midlothian councils?

When our local library moved from Currie High School to a redundant building at Currie Primary School, the collection of books nose-dived. A computerized list is no substitute for books on the shelves, as one has to know either a book title or author for the former to be of any use. Browsing for a "good read" in a library is one of life's pleasures: handling a book which may provide an insight into an extraordinary life or an exceptional flight of fancy; lingering over the dust-jacket hyperbole to wonder whether you really have discovered a literary gem is quite different from scrolling down a mere enumeration of titles and authors on a flickering screen. So, for goodness' sake, please get books back on the shelves: otherwise libraries WILL close because councils will be able to point to falling use. In fact, why should councils be responsible for libraries? I'm no fan of quangos, but councils are faced with so many demands which are more pressing than the mere provision of reading matter, that it's hard to believe that under their stewardship libraries will

improve and expand. Seems strange that Edinburgh has just been designated a city of literature at a time when we experienced a marked deterioration in the library service.

In Wester Ross we rely on Graeme and his mobile library. I have no doubt that this is a service under threat, but I can't emphasize enough how valuable it is. Of course the van carries a limited selection, but I can usually find something to read as Graeme has a fair idea of what his readers might enjoy. Unfortunately, his bosses in Inverness are so preoccupied with number-crunching and trying to get new readers that they run the risk of losing the existing core of users. Not that this is anything new - we seem to live in a climate of chasing after "new clients" rather than looking after established ones. I suspect this has happened with Radio Scotland, which is proud to announce an increase in the number of young people tuning in, perhaps at the expense of other listeners. I'm afraid I was one of those tiresome people who enjoyed Mr Anderson's Fine Tunes, as it was a perfect mix to garden to. I know there are interesting (stimulating?) programmes tucked in between the chat and "magazine" ones - but I'm not sufficiently motivated to take the trouble to seek them out. Many of the people who use the mobile library are housebound or don't have transport, so Graeme makes up boxes of books for them. If the van is axed, the nearest library from Badcaul to Torridon is in Gairloch High School, which is only open during school hours plus one "late" evening. Public transport is, truly, virtually non-existent, so I don't know how those of us without transport are expected to use the library. My parents greatly valued a similar service at Kilchrenan, near Loch Awe - their "mobile librarian" got to know their literary tastes so well that he put aside books they were likely to enjoy - when necessary he even brought them to the hospital in Oban.

We are only too aware that small, remote communities do not fare well under an accountant-led, "one size fits all" philosophy. We do not have the economy of scale and it is inevitable that the delivery of most services is likely to cost more

per caput. However, what is the alternative? Everybody in Scotland conveniently living in the Central Belt, Dundee and Aberdeen? At a time when the local population appears to be increasing and Poolewe has a swanky refurbished hall, not only are there fewer theatre companies on tour, but we are about to lose West Coast Arts (WCA). This has been run by volunteers for over fifteen years (?), but the present organizers wish to retire. On a frighteningly small budget (I enclose the last accounts sheet), WCA, living from hand to mouth, has managed to get touring theatre companies and musicians to include the area in their itinerary. At least one of the present organizers has connections with theatre, but the few of us who are willing to try to rescue WCA from oblivion have neither any relative experience nor the financial nerve. Simply put, we need practical, professional and financial help to run WCA.

To begin with, all WCA events take place in Aultbea's Nissen hut as the tiered seating is stored at Aultbea. Again, there is no public transport in the evenings, so most of the audience is from the immediate area. To encourage a wider audience it would be better if some of the productions were brought to Poolewe Hall, although this would mean a second seating system and somewhere to store it. Community transport might motivate people from other villages to turn out. Such provision would also enable a better uptake of evening classes which tend to take place in Gairloch: again, not accessible by public transport in the evenings.

When I worked in north Devon, the nearest small town, Great Torrington, had an Arts Centre, which played host to touring companies and showed films. It wasn't large or plush, but the auditorium was dedicated to the arts rather than being a multi-functional space like a village hall, which has to cater for all activities, from badminton to craft workshops, to the senior citizens' Christmas Party and everything in between. Our nearest equivalent is the MacPhail Centre in Ullapool High School – a modest theatre (in addition to a local hall), serving Ullapool's needs – it would have a job seating a Wester Ross-wide turn-out.

Again, there is virtually no public transport (and none in the evenings), and the journey can be treacherous in icy conditions as BEAR is notorious for not gritting the A835 adequately. It's worth pointing out that even Ullapool is fifty miles away. Just imagine consolidating all the theatres, concert halls and cinemas in Edinburgh and expecting Glaswegians to go through (by car, of course; there'd be no public transport...). I understand that a purpose-built theatre for the Loch Ewe area would be an extravagance, but how about a body such as SAC giving advice and financial aid on how to transform (without too much trouble), a rural hall into a decent auditorium for an evening? The committee steering the refurbishment of Poolewe Hall could have done with some guidelines concerning ideal facilities for arts groups such as travelling theatre. For instance, do notes on the pros and cons of a stage, and the most likely way to achieve good acoustics (they are appalling), exist? After all, a lot of money was spent on a hall which is tragically underused - partly because it is not theatre friendly.

Here, we're dependent on the Screen Machine for films, which last made an appearance during late winter. I'm aware that a new Screen Machine is on the stocks, so we can only hope that it visits more regularly than the old one. Unfortunately, the last time the Screen Machine made it to Gairloch it clashed with a ceilidh and, I seem to remember, a workshop, so quite a number of us missed the films. This was irritating, as the Gairloch and District Times ("Yellow Pages") carries notices of what's happening locally well in advance. We gather Screen Machine Mark II is easier to set up, so some of us are hoping that it might stop in Poolewe or Aultbea, rather than just Gairloch. Although the previous Property Manager of Inverewe didn't want the Screen Machine in the car park that is no longer the case. There is good parking here which is little used in winter, and, who knows? perhaps the restaurant at Inverewe (beside the car park and closed in winter), could be opened specially. How about the Screen Machine occasionally putting on older films or a particular genre, rather than simply showing what's currently on nationally? However, I do wonder why we have to

wait for the uncertain and irregular appearance of the Screen Machine... why, in principle, can't Poolewe Hall put on films? Returning to the theme of making a local hall a temporary auditorium, is there financial help for acquiring and installing the equipment?

Wester Ross is NOT well-served by Highland Council which has its loci in the "Far East": Inverness, and, for Ross and Cromarty, Dingwall. For "local initiatives" there are too many inadequately resourced organizations: GALE (Gairloch and Loch Ewe Forum) and the more successful Wester Ross Alliance (which tends to leave the Loch Ewe area well alone thanks to ineffectual GALE). Ross and Cromarty Enterprise (RACE) is, as the name suggests, less committed to this area. None of these organizations regards arts provision as part of their remit (apart from the occasional and modest "one off" grant). Frankly, if Scotland wants ALL areas of the country to have access to the arts, then poorly populated, relatively remote areas need suitably qualified people to fight their corner. A resident "arts officer" might be able to run a properly funded West Coast Arts; co-ordinate Feis Rois tuition and events in this area, and liaise with Eden Court and Ross and Cromarty arts and leisure department in Dingwall. We've already lost the Ross-shire music festival, the highlight of which in 2003 was an extraordinarily tall and willowy man from Gambia (?), dressed in flowing, golden yellow robes, playing an instrument resembling a small pot-still with a very long neck. It was brilliant to witness a sample of such a different culture in Poolewe!

At present the arts seem to be getting more, rather than less polarized: take Wee Stories Theatre, for example. In the past, it would include Aultbea in its tour; now it staggers no further than Eden Court for a couple of performances before returning to the Central Belt. Of course there are productions which cannot be staged in a village hall, and the 170-mile round trip to Inverness cannot be avoided (remember, we have to drive 85 miles back home after our evening out - even in winter - on twisting, narrow roads). However, I do object having

to go to Eden Court to see Wee Stories and other small-scale theatre companies. The ingenuity of a couple of actors using a handful of props to convey the plot of *Treasure Island* or a Greek myth is a delight to watch, and is just as powerful in a small hall (not to mention the pleasure of meeting the actors afterwards as we help pack away the props and dismantle the seating). IF the Cultural Commission feels that the way forward is to centralize the arts, then the almost complete lack of public transport and the sheer distances involved dictates that anyone living around here and in similarly remote areas will, quite simply, miss out. This was amply illustrated when my husband couldn't get back from Edinburgh in time to take us to Eden Court for an evening concert. Although I knew that our plans had gone agley by 10.30 am, I was unable to get the children to Inverness by public transport in time for the concert.

Eden Court has just been granted planning permission for grandiose developments. I am torn between being pleased and wondering about the repercussions for the rest of the Highlands. Inverness-based Highland Council will give a grant towards the refurbishment and extension of Eden Court; tell us that it is the cultural centre of the Highlands and probably won't give a stuff about any of us living in the west of the region (although, of course, we pay the same council tax rates).

Our predicament is a world away from the problems of Scottish Opera (I'm sorry, but I feel I have to bring the subject up). By the mid-1970s I had seen several operas at the London Coliseum and even one at Covent Garden. As a child, opera was unforgettable: sparkling, spectacular, lavish. It has left me with the feeling that if you want to stage opera you've got to do it properly – but that comes at a price and probably at the expense of other arts and aspects of culture. So the bottom line is, does Scotland *really need* its OWN opera company? Wouldn't it be better to throw in our lot with Welsh Opera to ensure one world-class company rather than two struggling ones, which are forever obliged to go cap in hand to seek more funding? (tiresome for all; time-consuming and energy-

sapping for the company; and the inevitable, negative publicity goes down badly with most of the public). Isn't it really an extravagance for two small countries to have separate opera companies? Funding the regionally diverse cultures of Scotland alone is a complex and expensive proposition, and does it really matter whether a cracking production of *Madame Butterfly* is produced in Cardiff or Glasgow? (Naturally, this is not likely to be the ideal solution for a modern Scottish opera....) Would it be fair to wonder whether the clamouring emanates from the relatively small chattering class of the Central Belt, whose London brethren secured an obscene proportion of lottery money to refurbish and extend Covent Garden? Do the distributors of money for the arts in Scotland want to be egalitarian or élitist?

We are enormously grateful to Poolewe Primary School for taking the children occasionally to the pantomime and even the ballet at Eden Court. I wish the school could afford something spectacular every year, to give the children an idea of the diversity of music and theatre. How many local children have seen a full orchestra or a full-production play? (or, of course, an opera?!).

When our elder daughter started school in 1995, I was horrified to discover that the primary school had no class time set aside for music. Having banged on about this at parents' evenings, it transpired that the school would have to find the money for a peripatetic music teacher from its own tight budget. I'm afraid I consider this very wrong: just how did it happen that the Scottish education system decided that music was less important than making a "worm garden" (invariably left to dry out in a warm classroom), or a project on the Egyptians? It is to the school's credit that eventually some of the classes did receive a regular singing lesson. How can educationists ever hope to aspire to help every child reach his or her potential if the provision of subjects such as music and art are randomly denied? I'm not even convinced that music and art are best taught locked into the present educational system. It's a pity that in a Scotland awash with charters for so many services, the tuition of musical instruments for

children seems as patchy and as variable as "post-code prescription" drugs. It would be helpful to have some indication of what it is reasonable to expect primary and high schools to provide. Perhaps every child who wishes to learn an instrument (or sing) should receive an allowance for lessons: irrespective of whether these are undertaken by schools or private tutor. For instance, our elder daughter plays flute and guitar; our younger one violin and guitar. We pay £8 per lesson per child (even though the guitar lesson, like the occasional singing lesson, is joint), and routinely fork out anything between £24 and £40 per fortnight. So when the High School music teacher packs off her many private pupils to the practice rooms for the duration of some of their Standard Grade music lessons, I find it slightly irksome. Nor was I impressed by the lack of support the school gave to the five youngsters who represented Gairloch High School at the Rhythms of the North concert at Eden Court on 8th November (but why should the music teacher at Gairloch High School put in any of her free time towards that when she could be earning £8 per lesson?). The local mod and ceilidhs take it for granted that they can call upon local young musicians (including our girls), to put in reliably sound, voluntary performances, but perhaps they don't realize that this culture is partly being sustained by families paying for private tuition. I gather that in some areas, such as Ullapool and Dingwall, the Feis movement provides low-cost, weekly, group lessons. Again, we're too far from the Feis Rois base in Dingwall to really benefit, although it does loan accordions and other expensive instruments to youngsters in this area. I guess I'm back to my "local arts/musician officer" idea: after all, the Feis could co-ordinate such a scheme if adequately resourced.

Mentioning the Feis provides a perfect link to the issue of gaelic. It wasn't until we went to gaelic-free Orkney this summer that I realized just how much it seeps into our everyday lives. Now I know there is a commission for the promotion of gaelic, but it is such a fiercely fought cause that I feel my comments regarding the local mod might not go down too well. As an outsider looking in,

broadly speaking there seem to be two strands to gaelic culture in the Highlands: the Mod and the Feis movement. They appear to have very different approaches to the promotion of the language and traditional music and I do hope that both the "Gaelic Commission" and the Cultural Commission have compared the two. For us, the Feis wins hands down, having an ethos of accessibility and inclusion; a belief that music-making is to be enjoyed rather than fought over in competition. We're not the only incomers to Poolewe who have found Feis Rois so congenial: Alex Urquhart-Taylor of the Tassel Bandits and his sister, Sarah, have benefited enormously from the Feis. We can't praise Feis Rois highly enough (although we do wish it had a greater local presence), and have enormous admiration for what Rita Hunter has achieved. The annual visit of the Feis Rois ceilidh trail is one of the all-too-rare occasions when talented young musicians play at Inverewe - the visitors (and some of the staff) love it! The launch of the trail at Scatwell is always a hugely enjoyable afternoon. We hope the innovative Blas concerts, at which the ceilidh trail youngsters played alongside seasoned musicians at Strathpeffer, go from strength to strength.

Although our shy elder daughter found the Senior Feis five-day residential course in Ullapool an ordeal, our younger daughter benefited hugely from the junior feis at Easter. We still can't quite believe that she was one of just two girls who took gaelic singing as their first choice, and enjoyed the attention of two talented singers. Once Sophie had overcome home-sickness she had a ball! The residential weeks are very good value - my only criticism is that the less pushy children don't always make it into the class which best matches their level of ability. It would be good to see towns other than Ullapool play host to these weeks, although the choice must be diminishing as the courses grow in popularity. Even now the MacPhail Centre can no longer accommodate everyone who wants to see the children perform at the ceilidh on the last evening. However, surely there are other organizations which could provide short, residential courses for music (and why stop at music? What about art and

drama?) to children at mainstream schools: for instance the Traditional Music School at Plockton and, for greater breadth, Edinburgh's St Mary's. I think the provision of extra study-time at school during holidays is, by and large, a rotten idea (except for major exams), as I believe it is very healthy for children to have a constructive life outside school (which is why I'm appalled at the prospect of poor, institutionalized children being at school from 8 am to 6 pm). A stimulating week opening your mind to something utterly different is more like it.

Now to the local mod, which should be a (just about the only?) cultural pillar of Poolewe. "Nothing to do with the Cultural Commission," I can almost hear you growl, but please bear with me, as it should be of great importance to the local gaelic culture. The following may sound like a personal rant, but I have to substantiate my criticisms of the local mod somehow. I stay well clear of the politics of it, but looking in from the outside I don't understand why the Wester Ross Provincial Mod has been hijacked by the Loch Ewe branch. In effect this means that the local mod always takes place in Poolewe (nice for us) rather than having a different venue every year. The result has been the inevitable drop in entries from other villages in Wester Ross. The music teacher at Gairloch High School doesn't have time in the curriculum (or isn't prepared to make any) for the mod, so if our daughters want to sing a duet at the local one we have to pay £16 per joint private lesson. This year, learners competed head-to-head with native gaelic speakers and in some cases the classes were open to all ages. Consequently, our P6 and S2 daughters were pitted against *native* gaelic speakers in S5 and S6. Shall we be expecting our elder daughter to endure her private agony to perform next year and pay the high school's music teacher at least £48 for the privilege? I probably wouldn't have bothered to make such a very trivial complaint if it weren't for a further two damaging developments at the local mod. The lesser involved the peripatetic music teacher for the nine "local" primary schools. The only primary school which she coached and entered for

the "instrumental group" class was from the village in which she lives. The other eight primary schools were not given the opportunity. However, the most brazen example of favouritism was when Poolewe Primary School sang against Gairloch Primary School's gaelic medium unit. OK, so my younger daughter is at Poolewe primary, but I think most of the audience was stunned by the vitriolic criticism of the two judges. The judge for gaelic rounded on Poolewe's youngsters for not making an effort to pronounce the words properly. This was manifestly unfair as the Loch Ewe branch had paid for a local, native gaelic speaker to visit the school to go through the song. The visitor had even stood at the shoulder of the teacher typing a phonetic version of the song, so between them they could decide on the most accurate rendition. Even more baffling was the gratuitous criticism of the lady judging the musicality of the two groups. Now I may not be much of a musician, but I sat next to one, and we both concluded that Poolewe Primary's enthusiastic, tuneful singing, which kept good time, would make a favourable impression on the judge. Not a bit of it: she awarded the Gairloch gaelic medium unit a staggeringly high mark for being out of tune (some of the children were, well, very flat), and not in time (only a handful managed to complete the song together). We weren't the only members of the audience who came to the sad conclusion that the judges were simply more well-disposed towards the gaelic medium unit. Rather than positive discrimination this was blatant prejudice. Whereas Feis Rois appears to have an all-embracing policy of promoting gaelic culture to youngsters of all abilities through enjoyable, non-competitive music-making and gaelic language classes, the mod seems to discourage those who are neither native speakers nor strongly committed. Is this why the gifted Urquhart-Taylors no longer participate? Many families in Poolewe don't have the gaelic, but are more than happy for their children to learn a gaelic song for the local mod at primary school, just as our daughters learned to recite a Burns poem every January at their Edinburgh one. So it's not enough to secure the future of gaelic, but it does ensure a level of

goodwill and passing interest from families who wouldn't otherwise have any links with the indigenous language and culture. What happened at the local mod this summer has only served to polarize the "have-gaelic" from the "have-nots", and perhaps the "have-nots" went away feeling that they are no longer welcome. I wonder how the Headteacher at Poolewe Primary will play it next year... enter the school as "gaelic medium" or not bother to enter the school at all? (She's a much better person than I am, so I guess neither....) Is this what the commission for the promotion of gaelic wanted to achieve? I can see no reason why the Cultural Commission shouldn't regard gaelic culture as part of its remit, and only hope that the two commissions consider very carefully the consequences of any relevant current policy. To reduce a possible rise in discrimination, perhaps ALL schoolchildren in gaelic-speaking areas should be taught at least a smattering of the language. To be truthful, it is yet another subject which has had a chequered start-stop path at Poolewe Primary School due to inadequate resources. At the moment, French is compulsory at Gairloch High School, but gaelic is not. The logic of this is??? A friend on Lewis has observed a disturbingly strong positive discrimination by schools towards children who attended gaelic medium playgroups and nurseries. Will gaelic become the new sectarianism; gaelic speakers the new élite? If our experience of the promotion of gaelic were solely through the Feis, we would have no such fears. I'm all for raising its profile (by all means have bilingual roadsigns, for instance), but aggressive promotion and positive discrimination will, I suspect, be counter-productive in the long run.

Crikey, I pity you if you've received hundreds of screeds like this from members of the public... so wishing you all the very best.

Yours sincerely,

Kate Donald.

K Donald (Mrs), pp Duncan, Flora and Sophie

WEST COAST ARTS

Income and Expenditure April 2003 – March 2004

Income

Ticket Sales	1933.70
Refreshments	178.35
Mems & Donations	50.00
Grants	5530.00
Other/floats repaid	566.59
Total	8258.64

Expenditure

Artists' Fees	3757.50
Hall Hire	307.00
Refreshments	44.81
Administration	1534.85
Bank Charges	119.00
Miscellaneous	86.10
Accomm Artists	441.00
	6290.26

PER EVENT:
£300 subsidy.
Haggle over B&B.
Each production about £450
So need to make £200 from
tkts, tea

Income		8258.64
Expenditure	-	6290.26
C.F.	-	6.86
	-	1961.52

Audience fig: av. 48 per performance.

We have a surplus of £1961.52

29/3/04