

# ELPHINSTONE INSTITUTE

*studying culture in context*

## Seinn Spioradil Exhibition on Tour in the Hebrides

It has been a fantastic experience to have completed two installations of the exhibition, Seinn Spioradail: Sacred Soundscapes of the Highlands and Islands, in Lewis, and the feedback so far has been overwhelmingly positive. The exhibition was on display for three months at Museum nan Eilean in Stornoway earlier this year before moving to Kinloch Historical Society in Balallan in mid-April. At both venues we held an opening event, with a short talk from myself and singing from some of the wonderful Gaelic precentors from the island including Torquil MacLeod, D. R. MacDonald, Calum MacDonald, and Murdo MacMillan. With Gaelic psalm singing and spiritual songs central to the exhibition's content, it was very special to have live singing



which hosts a digital sound archive, film, soundmap, and virtual tour.

*D. R. MacDonald (pictured top left) and Calum MacDonald (top right), presenting at the exhibition opening in Balallan. Frances Wilkins and Ronan Martin (left) at the opening in Balallan.*

**Frances Wilkins**

## Alex Green Tin Whistle Festival Success

The first ever Alex Green Tin Whistle Festival, took place 1–3 March 2024 in Aberdeen. Run in partnership with the Friends of the Elphinstone Institute, the project formed a key part of the ongoing Alex Green Tin Whistle Project, which comprised of additional strands including primary school educational work, archival publication, and the creation of a tutor book based on Alex's music and distinctive style. A unique festival, it brought national impetus and new multi-generational interest to Alex's legacy. With headline concerts and workshops from a broad spectrum of highly regarded performers, the rich diversity of tin whistle traditions across Scotland and beyond was well represented and situated Aberdeen as a vibrant centre of this tradition.

The festival accomplished our goals of reinvigorating interest in the tin whistle through Alex Green's legacy, engaging new players and young performers, and enabling accessibility to music making for young children. Throughout the festival weekend, a huge amount of support and good will towards Alex Green's legacy was expressed from multiple members of the public and partner organisations, each of whom 'went the extra mile' to ensure the event was a success. Those new to his playing commented on this widespread public regard for his legacy and upon the inspirational, encouraging, and welcoming atmosphere which this brought to the festival.



*l to r: Tom McKean, Martin MacDonald, Sara Reith, Mary Bergin, Mick Conneely, and Cathal McConnell at Lemon Tree concert.*



*Tin Whistle Conference at MacRobert Building, University of Aberdeen.*

We would like to give huge thanks to all involved: the project steering group, volunteers, our partners, Aberdeen Performing Arts, the TMSA, Fèis Rois, SC&T Youth, and our funders: Creative Scotland, The William Syson Foundation, and Aberdeen Performing Arts.

**Sara Reith**



## From the Director

We're through another Scottish winter, brightened this late spring by remarkable displays of the Aurora Borealis, fittingly the subject of one of our MLitt presentations this year. Halfway through now, and it's already been full.

I want to start by noting the loss of Joe Aitken, a wonderful, expressive singer with a twinkle always in his eye. No one could sing Bogie's Bonnie Bell like Joe and he won many a competition with it. For me, his signature song was always Twa Gadgies which expressed the freedom of the road and something, too, of Joe's attitude to life, 'Bit if it be sax or siven miles tae some toon, well, whit's the odds tae me?'

We welcomed PhD student Melissa La Rose who began her studies in January, focusing on fairy belief in the twenty-first century.

My folklore life continues to be busy. In February, I travelled to Antigua, Guatemala, for Cities on Volcanoes, a conference focusing on communities and individuals living in hazardous settings. I convened a session on volcano tourism and did a talk on the ways that community networks adapt, expand, and strengthen in times of crisis. I put together another session on song, poetry, and music as responses to volcanic disasters, drawing poets, singers, and teachers from St Vincent, Guatemala, Montserrat, and a group of London Montserratians who left after the 1997 eruption. They absolutely rocked the room and a local café late into the evening, a refreshing addition to any academic conference.

Working closely with community researchers and contributors from Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala, and colleagues from Ixchel, an international, interdisciplinary Disaster Risk Reduction project based at the University of Edinburgh, I contributed to a six-day field trip designed to create deep cultural encounters between scientists, many at a formative stage of their careers, and those who live with precarity of many kinds in their daily lives. My main takeaway was the idea of resistance: every stitch in a piece of embroidery, every warp and weft in handwoven Jaspé fabric, every quiet subsistence practice is an act of resistance saying 'we are here' and 'this is who we are'. It was deeply moving to see our participants learning from these testimonies and firsthand, by listening and by doing, acquiring visceral understandings of others' experiences.

Hopefully, this will impact their working lives as geologists and volcanologists, inspiring them to integrate and learn from indigenous and scientific knowledges.

While in Guatemala, in partnership with two community researchers, Mayalitzá Sosof and Alex Petzey, I have been working with Pedro Mendoza who has been making songs in his native Maya Tz'utujil language for more than thirty years. Working in partnership with Mendoza, we aim to produce a book for schools containing selected contextualized songs dealing with the environment, landscape, danger, and social issues. Other outputs will include a CD, interdisciplinary articles, and a book exploring the social, political, and community power of Mendoza's work. We hope that there might be a documentary film emerging, as well.

At the recent International Ballad Conference of the Kommission für Volksdichtung in Vitré, Brittany, I presented a talk on one of Mendoza's songs. I had the privilege of speaking about the themes, function, and meaning of a song he made about the 2005 landslide disaster in Panabaj, Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala. This powerful example is just the beginning of an exploration of this wonderful musician's contribution to cultural resistance in this deep yet vulnerable community.

I've recently contributed a piece to a Journal of American Folklore forum on how we handle the academic legacies of toxic individuals. It's a complex question that has been dogging academe and the arts for more than a century: Can we, should we, separate the man (and it is usually a man) and his work? There are no simple answers, though the key issues remain the same: listen to women's experiences and ensure that we create safe and transparent environments for all of our students.

I'm very excited to announce that in our 30th anniversary year, the Institute will host the 2025 congress of the Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore, 3–6 June, the largest academic gathering in our fields, drawing some 800 delegates. The theme will be Unwriting, offering opportunities to rethink the hegemonic power of writing: who gets to codify and gatekeep and, crucially, who gets to rewrite in a time in which we are rethinking power structures and inverting hierarchies.

And finally, I am delighted to announce Nicolas Le Bigre's recent promotion to Lecturer, which is well deserved.

*Thomas A. McKean*

### Supporting the Elphinstone Institute



*Students and staff from the Elphinstone Institute*

It is important to note the crucial role that donations and legacies play in the functioning of the Institute. Around seventy percent of our amazing range of programmes, partnerships, and projects, are funded by these wonderful gifts. I encourage anyone with a belief in the North-East's internationally renowned and domestically treasured culture and traditions to get in touch to find out how you can help us continue and expand our mission to research, celebrate, and promote the culture of the North-East and North of Scotland. (elphinstone@abdn.ac.uk or tel: 01224 272996)

# Elphinstone Tribute and News

## Joe Aitken Tribute

Joe Aitken (1944–2014) was one of Scotland’s best-ever singers of traditional songs and bothy ballads, and will remain an inspiring and much-loved figure for many years to come.

Learning his first songs at the age of four from some of the bothy lads on the Meigle farm where his father worked, he moved to Kirriemuir at the age of 8 – becoming part of the town’s fabric for the rest of his days.

After the Traditional Music Festival came to Kirrie in 1982, Joe very quickly became a fixture at similar festivals throughout the country. When his great pals Tam and Anne Reid (along with Ian and Norma Russell) started the Cullerlie Traditional Singing Weekend in 2000, he was invited as a guest, and was an ever-present supporter in future years.

His great humour, eloquence, and sense of what was right, made him equally popular as an MC and competition judge. And as a competitor, his name is engraved at least once on all the trophies he competed for: including a record seven wins at the Bothy Ballad Champion of Champions in Elgin.

Diagnosed with prostate cancer in August 2022, Joe thought himself fortunate to get a longer kick at the ball than many others in his situation, and enjoyed a farewell year travelling round the festivals he loved, and that loved him. With his dear wife Pat, he did have a few things left for the bucket list: including a trip round the Western Isles and the shortest flight from Westray to Papay, but otherwise felt he’d done everything he wanted to do in life.

Joe is survived by Pat, and children Dawn, Jackie, Trisha, and Young Joe.

*Scott Gardiner*



## The Traditional Singing Weekend at Cullerlie, 26–28 July 2024

A celebration of the singing traditions of Scotland, England, and Ireland in memory of Tom Reid (1929–2003) and Anne Reid (1939–2006), the weekend



brings together outstanding traditional singers. The event is especially for those who like to hear, enjoy, and join in unaccompanied traditional

*Picture left 'the Bothy Ballad King'!, Tom and Anne celebrate Tom's win at the Haughs of Turriff, 7 August 1977*

singing. Informal, friendly, and non-competitive, it will be just the place to encourage the young and less experienced as well as the old hands. The weekend includes informal concerts featuring guest singers: Rosie Davis, Shona Donaldson, Doug Hay, Annie Hughes, Jo Miller, Michael Quinn, Seb Stone, and Sheena Wellington, singarounds, and also includes workshops, craft demonstrations, and a talk.

For further information visit the website: [www.abdn.ac.uk/elphinstone/](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/elphinstone/) and for booking enquiries tel: 01330 860549.

## New Leader for Polish-Scottish Song Group

The past year has been an exciting one for the Polish-Scottish Song Group, which is somehow already in its fourteenth year. At the end of the summer we were very sorry to say goodbye to our leader, Janice Clark, who stepped down after six years at the helm. Janice gave us the confidence to try out more complicated arrangements and taught us a great deal about how to sing as a cohesive group through long performances.

With departures come opportunities, however, and we were thrilled that longtime member, Halina Ficon, took on the role as workshop leader. Halina – originally from Żywiec in the Polish Highlands – has been a key teacher of Polish songs in the group over the years, so the new role is a perfect fit and well deserved. Halina says that her father used to say: ‘where you hear singing, go, people have good hearts there’, so when she arrived in Aberdeen eighteen years ago she immediately looked for singers. We were lucky that she found us!



*Polish-Scottish Song Group with the Ambassador of Poland to the UK (back row, third from right)*

In October last year we welcomed the Polish Ambassador to the UK, Piotr Wilczek, for an evening with the group. At the end of May, building on the confidence that Grace Banks, Janice, and Halina have given us over the years, we participated in the Voluntary Services Aberdeen (VSA) Sing, Sing, Sing competition at Aberdeen’s Music Hall. Local choirs each sang two songs, before a panel of judges and an almost full house. All of this was to raise money for VSA’s excellent charitable work in the area. In anticipation of the event, renowned North-East singer Fiona Kennedy joined us for a workshop. If you’re interested in the group, please get in touch. All are very welcome.

*Nicolas Le Bigre*

# Elphinstone News and Events

## Toulmin Prize 2024

The Toulmin Prize 2024 is now open to all amateur writers over the age of sixteen. Stories should contain some aspect of life in North-East Scotland and may be written in Scots, including Doric, or English, or a mixture of either. The winner will receive a £500 prize, and the story will be read by North-East writer, Sheena Blackhall (*pictured right*), at a prominent University of Aberdeen event in September.

A short story of up to 4,000 words should be

submitted by 27 August 2024. Full details and the entry form and declaration can be found on the Toulmin Prize website at [www.abdn.ac.uk/elphinstone/](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/elphinstone/).

The Toulmin Prize, established in 2008 and awarded annually, commemorates the work of one of North-East's finest exponents of written Doric. The prize is generously sponsored by grandsons of Toulmin (John Reid), Steven and Martin Reid.



*Alison Sharman*



We recently hosted a Pysanka workshop with Nataliya Bezborodova, Honorary Research Fellow at the Institute, who joined remotely whilst travelling to Ukraine with supplies. Nataliya talked about the egg designing tradition in Ukraine, and students (*pictured left*) and staff enjoyed creating their individual designs.

If you would like to support the work of the Elphinstone Institute and its objectives: to study, record, and promote the cultural traditions and language of communities in the North and North-East of Scotland, to help establish closer ties between the Elphinstone Institute and communities, and to help the Elphinstone Institute raise funds, please consider becoming a Friend of the Institute (the annual subscription is £20.00 for twelve months). There are events organised by the Friends throughout the year including a Ballad Bus outing, and others to be confirmed.

*friends of the*  
**ELPHINSTONE**  
**INSTITUTE**

The AGM is on Tuesday, 18 June at the Elphinstone Institute, MacRobert Building, University of Aberdeen, at 7:30pm. Please come along and meet the Friends, and discover more about ways to help us achieve our aims.

## Who's Who at the Institute

### Patron

**Very Rev. Prof. Sir Iain Torrance**, Pro-Chancellor

### Staff

**Dr Thomas A. McKean**, Director, Ethnology and Folklore, ballads, custom and belief, Gaelic tradition, J. M. Carpenter Project

**Dr Frances Wilkins**, Senior Lecturer, Ethnomusicology, sacred singing in coastal communities, Scottish fiddle traditions in northern Canada

**Nicolas Le Bigre**, Lecturer, Ethnology and Folklore, archives

**Professor Emeritus Ian Russell**, Ethnology, Folklore, and Ethnomusicology, oral traditions, including singing, music-making, drama, and speech

**Simon Gall**, Public Engagement Officer

**Alison Sharman**, Administrator

### Research Students

**Mary Cane**, the grandmother experience in family life today

**Mollie Carlyle**, the legacies of Stan Hugill

**Lauren Hossack**, Elphinstone Scholarship, literature, heritage, and the making of Scottish communities

**Tolheishel Khaling**, Uipo (Khoibu) folk songs

**Melissa La Rose**, fairy belief in the twenty-first century

**Robert Milne**, composition and Doric language texts

**Claire Needler**, Elphinstone Scholarship, bilingualism in North-East schools

**Brenna Quinton**, vernacular religion: blended Christian and spiritual well-being practices in modern-day Scotland

**Edda Starck**, landscapes of music: the more-than-human lives and politics of musical instruments

**Lorna Summers**, community boatbuilding on the Moray coast

**Carley Williams**, safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in Scotland

**Chris Wright**, Elphinstone Scholarship, the role of traditional arts in place-based education

### Honorary Research Fellows

**Dr David Atkinson**, J. M. Carpenter Project

**Dr Pat Ballantyne**, Scottish step-dance traditions

**Dr Athanasios Barmplexis**, contemporary shamanic healing in Scotland

**Nataliya Bezborodova**, custom and belief

**Dr Julia Bishop**, J. M. Carpenter Project

**Sheena Blackhall**, creative writing in Scots

**Dr Elaine Bradtke**, J. M. Carpenter Project

**Dr Katherine Campbell**, ethnomusicology, music performance

**Dr Robert Young Walser**, J. M. Carpenter Project

**Les Wheeler**, Scots Language, education

**Dr Sheila Young**, marriage ritual during the pandemic

### What's On

Keep up to date with all of our events by following us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, or our website: [www.abdn.ac.uk/elphinstone](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/elphinstone)

### Support the Institute

The Institute relies on outside financial support to make many of its activities possible. If you would like to help, join the Friends of the Elphinstone Institute, volunteer, or have suggestions, please contact the Administrator, [a.sharman@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:a.sharman@abdn.ac.uk)

*Edited by*  
**Alison Sharman**

