

# **Dreaming Bread and Skyrrie Stanes: A Celebration of Scottish Folk Magic and Community Traditions**

**By Valentina Bold**

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A Celebration of Scottish Folk Magic and Community Traditions*

Scottish Storytelling Centre, Sunday 11th November, 2018

'Dreaming Bread and Skyrrie Stanes' set itself an ambitious agenda: to bring together folklore in practice, and folklore in theory. It did this through a celebration of Scottish community traditions: 'balancing reflecting and recording, with acting and doing'. This was a co-production from Cailleach's Herbarium and Botanica Fabula, with music from Debbie Armour, and supported by the popular @FolkloreThursday #FolkloreThurs - 31.3K followers and counting. Held in the auspicious setting of the Scottish Storytelling Centre, on the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day, it was a day for healing, and for making connections. Stories brought us together told, as Stanley Robertson put it, heart to heart - and with impressive technological awareness. Everything was beautifully presented and professionally delivered - including live-streaming - to perfection.

From the opening address from the organisers, Scott Richardson-Read and Amanda Edmiston, we were in the hands of assured guides. Richardson-Read's work, through Cailleach's Herbarium, is based on an in-depth knowledge of traditional customs and beliefs. Edmiston (@herbalstorytell) of Botanica Fabula, is a notable, and increasingly influential, figure in Scottish folklore. Her activities in just over the past few months include an exhibition, 'A Kist in Thyme' at Stirling University's MacRobert Centre, part of a year long programme exploring the *Tobar an Dualchas* archive. She has shone new light on the significance of Orcadian writer, SNP activist and food folklorist, F. Marian McNeill, at an event at the NLS during the International Storytelling Festival. She has explored

'Scottish Herbal Magic' at the Ashmolean, linked to the exhibition, 'Spellbound: Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft'. She is also part of the @FolkloreThursday team, and an experienced teller of tales, who has brought Scottish stories alive in China.

Given this team, it is unsurprising that this was a very aesthetically pleasing, event, with tremendous attention to detail. Amelia Starling 'Sharing the Magic of #FolkloreThursday', who blogs at thewillowweb.com, had brought her own cloutie tree, for participants to attach messages about the meaning of folklore, over the course of the day. Each delegate found a small brown envelope on their chair, with a trace of herbal magic to spark discussions - my own contained rowan berries, and the beginnings of a conversation with my neighbour. People had come from far afield - from all over Scotland and across the border, alerted to the event by social media and by personal connections.

Claire Hewitt started the formal proceedings with a substantial story of 'Bones, Stones and Healing Threads', setting the scene for the day's key themes of magic and resolution through a highly appropriate Jack tale, where 'always in the darkness there is light, there is warmth', and where kindness triumphs over concern for the self.

Following on, in 'Scotland's Visionaries', Julian Goodare used extracts from the online *Survey of Scottish Witchcraft* to consider ways of uncovering traces of traditional beliefs in the between-the-lines places of witch trial reports. He brought a compassionate, and fresh, set of perspectives to the subject, and to those who 'experienced their world through meeting fairies and ghosts'. His approach echoed the emphasis on worldview as a way to appreciate emic belief, pioneered in folklore by David Hufford's *The Terror that Comes in the Night* (1982).

Moving from persecution to cures, Ross Parish considered 'Traditions and Customs of Healing Wells in Scotland'. Parish presented an A-Z (literally) of associations where B is for Beltane, H for Healing, L for Love and Q for Quartz - the last through a discussion of the pebble offerings left at St Mungo's Well, Alloway. This provided context for Parish and Richardson-Read to jointly consider 'Sacred Wells Protection Work', and to highlight the Facebook page 'Holy Wells, Healing Wells & Sacred Springs of Britain' which is campaigning for preserving and curating these places in respectful ways. Edmiston followed this with a moving story of a 'Guardian of the Wells', in her inimitable, often humorous, and

compelling performance style.

At this point, I passed by the chance to participate in a series of workshops which, I heard afterwards, were quite wonderful: Rookery Mead on 'Bronze and Iron Age Mead Making' (I did manage to taste a sample later in the day - which was wonderful); Jean Edmiston and Victoria Chanin on 'Solway Folklore and Herbs' and Grass Roots Remedies giving hands-on advice on 'Community Herbalism: Folk Medicine for All'. My reason for foregoing these was simple: the chance to hear Jess Smith talking about 'Saving the Tinkers' heart', the award winning film, and the campaign.

To see Smith speaking about her culture through a series of episodes that travelled from childhood to the present and back was a masterclass in compassionate storytelling with a campaigning edge. She took us along a powerfully meandering path, journeying through stories seamlessly to take her audience to her endpoint, with the structural awareness of the finest narrator. This was the voice of her people: haunting, beautiful, human and enduring.

A hard act to follow — I spoke next, with the title 'For God's Sake Protect me: the mythology of swords'. Focussing on a sword in the Annan Museum collection, which I have recently written about in *The Kinmont Willie Sword and Other Tales of Mettle*, I chose to explore connections between material culture, story and song, looking at swords as resonant objects, associated with danger, with protection, and with specific and often legendary people. I was honoured that Jess Smith rounded this off with a tragic tale of a blacksmith and lost love, 'For the Love of Minnie'.

Other highlights, in a packed day, included Greg Kenicer, offering 'A whirlwind tour of Scottish plant magic' related to his *Scottish Plant Lore: An Illustrated Fauna*. Claire Hewitt's tale, 'In the tracks of the Fairy woman', was followed by Elinor Predota on 'Scottish Folk Weather Magic'. As well as Richardson-Read's explanation of the titular, and magical, skyrie stanes, Amanda Edmiston presented us with real life Dreaming Bread. From McNeill's recipe of 1929, this sweet shortbread, with almonds and herbs, was broken over a bride's head to bring dreams of love to come, and good luck to all. Debbie Armour performed a selection from the organisers' spoken word album of stories and charms, launched later that evening: *Tales of the Taibhsear*. In all, it was a day of new directions and connectivities, of traditional forms delivered in current ways, and

above all of stories, old and new, spoken, analysed and sung.

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