

## Turning out to make history

# Our Story Scotland



In part two of our history of the OurStory Scotland archive, **James Valentine** explains the challenges faced in obtaining funding and presenting multi-media storytelling and exhibitions in diverse locations around the country



Above: workshop facilitators find Our Story Scotland represents a refreshingly unfamiliar diversity

### Turn of Events

National archiving of the stories of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people depends on the coincidence of community initiative and institutional interest, but these would have been inconceivable or fruitless without developments on the societal level, including that of Scotland as a nation. Turning out to make history is contingent on the turn of events.

1999 saw the establishment of the first Scottish Parliament since 1707. This brought a sense of renewal and redefinition that was built into the constitution of the parliament itself. The active campaign for constitutional change in Scotland

had brought many marginalised groups into the debate and resulted in a constitution that incorporated equality and political consultation. The new Scottish Parliament was committed to encouraging equal opportunities, defined as ‘the prevention, elimination or regulation of discrimination between persons on grounds of sex or marital status, on racial grounds, or on grounds of disability, age, sexual orientation, language or social origin, or of other personal attributes, including beliefs or opinions, such as religious beliefs or political opinions.’ Equality embraces diversity. Post-devolution Scotland shows that ‘a vibrant civil society with clear political opportunity structures enables non-governmental organisations to work with Equality Units, thereby strengthening their role and increasing their effectiveness.’

An example of this is the Equality Network that campaigns for human rights for LGBT people in Scotland. This charity has been funded by the Scottish Government since 2002 to consult and be consulted – to consult with LGBT people about their needs and priorities and to feed into the Government’s own consultation process.

Scotland’s progressive policies in the first years of the Scottish Parliament have to be seen against the backdrop of a progressive Westminster Parliament, which was still able to legislate for Scotland in reserved matters, and the legislation of the European Union in the areas of equality and human rights. Earlier, Scotland had been seen as the passive or grudging recipient of Westminster liberalisation. For example, the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 decriminalised male homosexuality in private between consenting adults in England and Wales, but not Scotland, where it took another thirteen years to reach the statute book. Post-devolution Scotland began to lead in progressive legislation, starting with the fiercely contested repeal of Section 2A (28 in England and Wales) that prohibited the ‘promotion’ of homosexuality

by local authorities. Scotland’s constantly contrastive self-image in relation to its neighbour was able to be painted in the colours of diversity.

The official readiness to learn about our lives in our own terms has meant that there has been not only a growing commitment to equality and diversity in public institutions, reflected in the access policies and practices of museums, but also a desire to collect and present stories that inform. While governmental preference is still for statistics, the power of our stories has not escaped the notice of official bodies, including the Equality Unit and government ministries. The first ever celebration in Scotland of the annual LGBT History Month included an official reception at Edinburgh Castle hosted by the Minister of Communities, who made special mention of OurStory Scotland and Remember When as the two active organisations devoted to recording the oral history of the LGBT community in Scotland.

A self-consciously progressive Scotland, combined with the networking opportunities afforded by a small nation, has meant that egalitarian policy and practice can be especially effective. This has had implications for our work, not only through the education and access policies of public institutions like museums, but also through the availability of funding.

Conserving and sharing ‘our diverse heritage’ is the stated objective of the Heritage Lottery Fund. With money from the National Lottery, it has funded numerous heritage projects in the UK since 1994, including oral history and archiving. After an initial set-up grant from Glasgow City Council, we were awarded funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund through Awards for All Scotland. Further funding came from SCARF (Scottish Community Action Research Fund), established to assist communities to conduct their own action research. SCARF was administered by Communities Scotland, and was funded by the Scottish Government for a relatively short time span between 2002 and

2009. This funding came at an opportune moment, as it constituted the matching funding required by the Scottish Arts Council Lottery Fund for the award of a substantial grant in 2005 for a project celebrating Queer Stories. Just as one connection can lead to several, a small grant, well targeted and effectively used, can attract further funding, and a successful project can lead to subsequent invitations: Love Out of Bounds emerged from ideas invited for further inclusive storytelling projects, and was funded by Creative Scotland for 2010 – 2011.

Funding can be the life and death of voluntary organisations, and not always in the obvious way. The funding we received was essential to ensure we had the appropriate equipment to make high quality recordings for archiving (with the good fortune of building our collection at the time of the digital turn) and to set up a website to present and publicise our work. The administration of the budget and the tight project deadlines, however, can take over the lives of the volunteers who run the charity. During a year or two of intense activity, the pleasures outweigh the burdens, but it is unsustainable in the longer term. As we wish to remain a voluntary organisation without paid staff, we eschew the funding treadmill that judges all in terms of grant applications and size of award. Essentially, the major funding we received from 2004 onwards was instrumental in realising what had always been our potential and our pretension. Our name had laid claim to a national dimension, and we now had the resources to turn to the nation.

### Turning to the nation

The stereotype of LGBT lives locates them in the big city. OurStory Scotland knew this had to be challenged, not just by collecting stories in big cities that tell of lives elsewhere, but by turning to regional hubs across the country for stories from other centres, smaller towns and rural communities. In 2005 we piloted our storytelling workshops in Aberdeen and Inverness, the latter acting as a focus for the Highlands, attracting people to travel hundreds of miles to events. We followed up the

pilot studies with an intensive year of storytelling across Scotland in 2006.

The national funding we had received enabled us to do more than passively benefit from the turn of events, and instead facilitated the staging of events ourselves, turning them into multimedia occasions for storytelling. In the smaller cities we took the initiative in establishing the events, through local contacts, LGBT health organisations and art centres. In the larger cities we ensured a degree of publicity and participation through linking with an existing LGBT festival or Pride celebration.

In each location we turned chance to our advantage, making the most of local strengths and the serendipity that is an underestimated source of creativity. The key was to find resourceful local contacts and to build cooperation. In Dumfries we worked with LGBT Youth Scotland and with Scotland's only Lecturer in Storytelling, Tom Pow, who had been suggested by Donald Smith, Director of the Scottish Storytelling Centre. This culminated in an all-day storytelling event at a rural campus, with participants travelling from remote parts of the Borders. Later in Duns Library, in another part of the Borders, an exhibition of our stories celebrated LGBT History Month. In the Highlands, several visits for storytelling and oral history culminated in Diverse Stories Day in Inverness, with video diaries, oral history recordings, an exhibition of caricatures of the 'Nessie Girls' (gay and transgender women together), and filmed storytelling performance.

Different locations presented varied opportunities for participation from the diversity that makes up the LGBT community. Other LGBT groups had informed us of their difficulty in reaching bisexual and transgender people, so we were attuned to any possibilities of more inclusive storytelling, not only with those who identify as bisexual or transgender, but also with those whose identification spans or defies categories, is fluid, ambiguous or

undefined. Some identified as queer, others as nothing in particular:

'Every time I've tried to fit in with a label, it's been such a struggle. I've always had to give up a bit of myself to fit in with a label and I think that's why I ended up getting to the stage where I – I don't want to give up any bits of myself so if that's the case I just can't take on any label. I would rather have none of them or all of them, because in actual fact, that's more accurate, that doesn't hem me in anyway, I can express myself more freely if I say that it doesn't matter – I'm all of them or none of them.' (Nick)

'We were concerned to start in a way that demonstrated our commitment to inclusion: our first oral history interview was in Glasgow with Steph, an intersex person who identifies as L, G, B and T, and who defies official classification: "There are very rare occasions when you come across a form that's got 'other': male, female or other, and they also give you a box underneath to define "other"" (Steph)

The particularly significant transgender participation in Inverness meant that we returned for follow-up oral history interviews. Similarly,

A 'weatherhouse' showing the changing socio-political climate





the participation of bisexuals in our drama workshops led to our first group interview or reminiscence, with participants from Bi-Scotland.

Some venues offered distinct possibilities for storytelling. In Edinburgh we were able to stage a three-day creative writing workshop and a theatre piece written by Brian Thompson, dramatising stories collected by Remember When. The performances were filmed for the archive. In Tayside, Dundee Contemporary Arts presented us with numerous creative opportunities for visual storytelling. From the outset Sarah Derrick, Head of Education, and Richie Cumming, Community and Education Coordinator, encouraged the dynamic interaction of the visual and the verbal, as in our Text Out event already described. In Dundee we also explored the visual expression of changing and multiple identities and initiated Supporting Stars, which subverted the heteronormative model of the family tree by constructing models of support in three-dimensional mobiles. Our Dundee workshops provided us with a wealth of images and recordings for exhibition and archiving. Our all-day workshop Every Picture Tells a Story at Dundee Contemporary Arts included active participation by Bob Cant, who had been an inspiration since his groundbreaking collection of lesbian and gay life stories in 1993, later expanded for a new edition.

In Aberdeen and Glasgow we were able to set up storytelling venues in the annual Pride celebrations. In

**Europe's largest all-women drumming ensemble, Sheboom, opening OurSpace at Kelvingrove 2008**

Aberdeen this presented the rare opportunity of a storytelling marquee. The OurStory Tent had a display of episodes to encourage further storytelling, while Madame Hystoria encouraged you to enter the tent where all would be revealed, using story cards as cues to start off your narration. In addition to video diaries and filmed storytelling performance, we collected 60 episodes from a remarkable variety of participants.

We realised this was turning out to make history, to become the world's first project to focus on multi-media storytelling with a nationwide LGBT community for public representation and museum archiving. The episodes collected all over the country have already been archived in National Museums Scotland, and we continue to archive oral histories and other forms of storytelling. Through the OurStory Scotland Collection in the Scottish Life Archive we can recognise ourselves as included in Scottish life, the nation and its culture.

### Historic turnout

The history-making nationwide storytelling deserved a historic turnout at a culminating event. This it achieved, and one culmination leads to another as the storytelling continues. The first grand culmination took place in the Glasgow! Festival in November 2006: the OurStory Ceilidh.

The OurStory Ceilidh revisited the origins of the ceilidh as a participatory event combining words, music and dance, reinvented it for our community, incorporating storytelling performances by twenty LGBT storytellers from all over the country, and subverted it through stories, dance and pictures. The tales told of loves unsung by the bards:

'I didn't know it was possible for girls to love other girls, or for women to have a relationship that was more than just friends.' (Maria)

'Then the other one, the other song comes to mind, that 'I didn't know I was looking for love'. So, only nine months before, I'd married the third husband and now I was a lesbian.' (Kath)

The dancers, aided by a proliferation of kilts, broke down the rigid gender conventions of traditional patterns, and

the austere Trades Hall in Glasgow was decorated with seditious images. Observing the scene from on high were enlarged portraits of the Nessie Girls, whose initial caricatures by Aileen Graham had been enlarged by Charlie Hackett and augmented by a huge storytelling wallhanging. While the Nessie Girls took their place amongst the oil paintings of the great and the good, Steph's multiple screenprints, transgressing boundaries of gender and sexuality, were set amidst the gilded list of Deacon Conveners. The turnout was so high that the hall keeper informed us that the hall was full and we could admit no more. The storytelling performances, with Donald Gray as MC, were filmed by Haber for exhibition and archiving.

The artwork display at the OurStory Ceilidh was a natural development of the visual storytelling that had increasingly characterised our nationwide project. The strength of the visual element had not been anticipated in the original application to the Scottish Arts Council, which had focused on oral history, storytelling and performance. As the project developed we kept in touch with Emma Turnbull, Literature Officer at the SAC. With the backing of her colleagues, including Jim Tough, the Director of Arts, she was able to extend the SAC's support for these developments, including exhibition work, through a further year beyond the original deadline. This extraordinary flexibility in a public funding body enabled us to build on the connections and creations and to plan further culminations, seen as summations without conclusion.

There followed a year of workshops and exhibitions. In Glasgow this included the exhibition at the Winter Gardens, the display of the OurStory wallhanging and storytelling video at the Tramway (visual arts and performance venue), and a mask workshop run by Ruth Waterhouse, where participants expressed different aspects of public and private selves through mask creation, and then were filmed speaking of the significance of their masks:

'This represents me because I'm gay and the colours are pure bold because I'm just bold as brass.' (Stephanie)

‘Two faces, both are me. Inside I’m the same person. What I did find was that some people would only identify with one face.’ (Margaret)

‘[The teacher] screamed one day over the playground, to try to get everybody to come in, and I couldn’t move very quickly, ‘get a move on ya poofy wee cripple’, and that’s what the mask represents.’ (Criz)

A later workshop led by Kate Charlesworth helped participants to tell a greater or smaller part of their life story through cartoons, comic strips or storyboards, and to provide further context through filmed storytelling. In both these cases, the artwork (masks or cartoons) and the storytelling performance that accompanied them became material for exhibition and archiving.

It was following our exhibition at the Winter Gardens that the Open Museum contacted us, and we began to work on a reminiscence box, with stories and objects that would have significance for different generations of LGBT people, artefacts and memorabilia that could be touched and held in the hand. The object handling kit itself constitutes an archival box, but its purpose is to go out into the community, whether or not LGBT, to educate and to generate further stories. The OurStory handling kit may be the first LGBT reminiscence box in any public museum. It has been used on several public occasions since and has helped to trigger memories of those more familiar with its contents and to inspire questions from younger people about a history of which they had been unaware.

Two large exhibitions were mounted at the beginning of 2008, RoundABout in Aberdeen and OurSpace in Glasgow. RoundABout turned the borders of the gallery inside out, so that displays were seen through plate-glass windows in a busy shopping area of the city, and graffiti painted on the outside walls were as much a part of the exhibition as the unusual materials for storytelling inside, that included dinner plates, an installation of questionnaires, and a feedback sofa for viewers’ comments. Understandably, we are still tackling

the problem of how to archive some of the exhibits. This innovative exhibition curated by Mark Duguid and Charlie Hackett was officially opened by the Lord Provost of Aberdeen.

OurSpace made history by becoming the first significant LGBT exhibition at a museum in Scotland, and it was not a minor museum but the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow, the UK’s largest civic museum and art gallery and Scotland’s most visited attraction. An inspiration was the groundbreaking Rainbow City exhibition by RememberWhen at the City Arts Centre, Edinburgh 2006. OurSpace: Making Inner and Outer Space for LGBT Lives, exhibited for LGBT History Month 2008, was curated by Dianne Barry, who went on to curate two of our displays for the 2009 Social Justice exhibition sh[OUT] described earlier. OurSpace featured a map of historical LGBT spaces in the city and a listening post of oral history recordings (including Edwin Morgan, the Scots Makar, our first patron). The recordings revealed how we have made space for ourselves:

‘I met him in a cinema, where many people have met people! It was a cinema that no longer exists, Green’s Playhouse, the largest cinema in Europe, which held about 4,000 people [...] It was one of those places that although it couldn’t advertise as being a ‘gay cinema’, that’s what it was and there was a great hive of activity among the gay community. So if you wanted, not necessarily to meet the great love of your life, but to have an experience, you would go to Green’s Cinema.’ (Edwin)

‘I did probably only really get involved in the lesbian community in the autumn when I joined the Lilidots, a hill walking group for lesbians in Scotland. Just having coming out, it was just wonderful to meet all these women who were so like me in so many ways.’ (Lynne)

‘In 2003, we had a visible Scottish Pride presence. We had a banner so we are actually visible there. You can have bisexuals marching there but nobody knows you’re there, but we had a very visible presence there, which worked.’ (Bi-Scotland)

‘And when you’re in the back of a fire engine you can become

claustrophobic and become isolated and there’s nowhere to go [...] One thing that got me out of the situation – without a shadow of a doubt – was wanting to become a fire brigade driver [...] on the way back to the [fire] station you might make a slight detour [...] and the boys would be looking at the girls and I’d be looking at the boys and they just could not handle this, especially if I was doing the driving and would be going round in circles going “He’s nice, he’s nice, he’s nice.”’ (Stewart)

Stories were at the heart of the OurSpace exhibition, including a video of storytelling performances, a story tree for attaching one-liners, and artwork collected during visual storytelling throughout Scotland, together with specially developed pieces such as the Chinese lanterns comprising multiple images of Steph’s identities and a weatherhouse showing the changing socio-political climate. The exhibition was opened by Hilary Third of the Scottish Government’s Equality Unit, and the massed drums of Sheboom, Europe’s largest all-women drumming ensemble, turned out to create vibrations throughout the museum.

**The OurStory Ceilidh revisited the origins of the ceilidh as a participatory event combining words, music and dance, reinvented it for our community**



### Turning over to others

Stories can shake foundations. It would be a disappointment if LGBT storytelling and archiving were not to create vibrations, tremors and waves. Part of the objective of this kind of work is to have repercussions on social policy, archiving and education. Even as we continue, it is important to reflect on our work as we turn over our materials and methods to others. This turning over and passing on has occurred from the beginning of the project, and has caught the action at various stages of development.

Passing on the social policy implications of LGBT stories has occurred through poster presentations in Scotland, England and Brazil, research groups such as Neglected Narratives at the University of Stirling, and presentations at conferences on reminiscence work (Belfast), on LGBT people growing older (Edinburgh) and on LGBT health research (Glasgow).

More specifically on collecting and archiving LGBT stories, we have passed on our experience via our Project Pack, that gives guidance on oral history, storytelling methods and copyright issues, and has been distributed by Ann Marriott, LGBT History Month Coordinator for Scotland, for use in projects all over the country. Stories and artwork have been supplied to organisations who wish to hold exhibitions or workshops, including libraries, trade unions, charities and health services. Together with Ellen Galford of Remember When, we gave an oral history workshop at the International Lesbian and Gay Association (Europe) meeting in Glasgow. Training in storytelling and oral history for archiving, especially where working with neglected narratives, has been provided for Stirling University and the Open Museum. Workshops have been offered at conferences on New Research on Sexualities and History (Women's History Scotland), on Socially Engaged Arts Practice (Pier Network, Tramway and Scottish Arts Council), and on Hidden Voices (Lapidus Scotland). Liz Stanley, Director of the Centre for Narrative and Auto/Biographical Studies at Edinburgh University, generously agreed to

hold the inaugural conference of the Centre jointly with OurStory Scotland on the theme of Neglected Narratives, and our presentation was written up to provide guidance for storytelling with vulnerable communities through a variety of narrative acts.

The mutual trust that has developed with museums in Glasgow has meant that we have been consulted by museums and galleries, such as the People's Palace, Open Museum and the Gallery of Modern Art, especially in relation to opening up learning and access, both in terms of their collections and their public. At a national level, we were invited by the National Library of Scotland to participate in the consultation on a proposal for a National Sound Archive for Scotland. The Scottish Arts Council selected our Queer Stories nationwide storytelling project as an example of best practice of informal learning through the arts, and invited us to join with Rachel Smillie, Glasgow's first ever storytelling development officer, to undertake a new project called Love Out of Bounds. This project brings together a diverse range of participants, including people from minority ethnic groups, irrespective of gender and sexuality, to tell their stories of loves that may be rejected, or considered inappropriate, by their community, culture, family or faith. We are finding common ground between straight and LGBT people, and people from majority and minority ethnic communities. Love Out of Bounds dares to transgress the boundaries of who we are considered to be: our identity and community. For some of the workshop facilitators our group represents a refreshingly unfamiliar diversity.

Turning over to others the outcome of archiving pleasures would be irresponsible if we were not to give some warnings and recommendations. Our advice would be to obtain good digital equipment from the beginning, devise a copyright clearance form in conjunction with official archives and obtain agreement before recording, recognise that summarising recordings is too demanding for most volunteers and may be a worthy contender for a share of any budget, be wary of

accepting unidentified materials that cannot be archived, use persistence and recourse to access policy if you wish to have your collection archived at a public institution, obtain a web presence through a cooperative web designer, be open to serendipity and pursue opportunities for new ways of collecting stories, gather together volunteers who are cooperative and flexible with each other, treasure and motivate them by including them as storytellers in events and by including storytelling in regular meetings, do not underestimate the time taken for administering a grant budget, avoid becoming dependent on funding especially if your main resource is voluntary work, avoid burnout through your life being taken over and remind paid officials now and then that you are volunteers. If this sounds a formidable list, it is worth bearing in mind that we found that archiving pleasures vastly outweighed the pains: there is gratification in turning out to make history.

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*James Valentine is Chair of OurStory Scotland, Honorary Senior Research Fellow in the School of Applied Social Science at the University of Stirling.*

#### Further reading

Bob Cant, *Footsteps and Witnesses: Lesbian and Gay Lifestories from Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2008)

Open Museum, *Out There – The Open Museum: Pushing the Boundaries of Museums' Potential* (Glasgow, 2010)

Judith Squires, 'Equality and Diversity: A New Equality Framework for Britain?', unpublished paper presented at School of Public Policy, (University College, London University, 2003)

James Valentine, 'Narrative Acts: Telling Tales of Life and Love with the Wrong Gender', in Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 9 (2), Art. 49, (2008). <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0802491>