

Chapter 4

Scotland: A literate nation with a love of books

Scotland was one of the first literate societies in Europe. Educational pioneers in Scotland recognised literacy as a basic right and used it as a tool to lift men, women and children in Scotland from poverty and to achieve equality of opportunity.

In 1496 the Scottish Parliament passed the world's first compulsory education law, obliging each freeholder to send his eldest son to school at six years old. But literacy and education remained the preserve of the aristocracy and the Church.

In the sixteenth century the concept of compulsory education was carried further with the egalitarian principles of the religious reformer John Knox, who proposed that education be accessible, comprehensive, democratic and free to all of ability. By the early 1700s reading was offering access to ideas and experiences which would broaden the mental horizons of most Scots and enable them to engage with issues far beyond their community. As the century advanced, a further dimension to literacy emerged in the shape of imaginative literature, offering stimulus and pleasure as the motivation for reading, and also writing.

By the 1790s, almost all Scots could read, regardless of wealth, gender, status or location. Visitors to Scotland were surprised at the widespread literacy and reading tastes of the Scottish public.



1.



2.



3.



4.

It was observed that even servant girls had copies of Burns' poems and other popular literature of the day, and people of the most modest means had their own collection of books. What they could not buy, they borrowed from libraries – each sizeable town had one, following the precedent set by Allan Ramsay in Edinburgh. Dr Samuel Johnson noted in a visit to the remote Hebridean Islands that he 'never encountered a house in which he did not find books in more languages than one'.

Literacy opened up new cultural choices. Records from the library at Innerpefferay in Perthshire between 1747 and 1800 show books loaned to the local baker, the blacksmith, the cooper, the dyer and his apprentice, to farmers, stonemasons, tailors and household servants. The books borrowed were a balance between the religious and the secular.

In the 1860s, 1 in 140 of the Scottish population received a secondary education and 1 in 1,000 attended University. Scotland's dedication to advanced education is long-standing and its universities are among the oldest in the world. From 1720 to 1840 the student population of Scotland trebled.

1. Statue of John Knox in the quadrangle of New College, Edinburgh
2. Image from Dr Thomas Guthrie's Ragged School in Edinburgh
3. Allan Ramsay, owner of the first lending library
4. Dr Samuel Johnson and James Boswell depicted in Edinburgh's High Street en route to the Hebrides



1.

2.

3.

1. Craighouse at Napier University, Edinburgh
2. New buildings on the Heriot-Watt University Campus, Edinburgh
3. Matthew Taylor from Peterhead is introduced to the largest book in his local library

As university education was relatively cheap, many students came from working backgrounds. Lectures were open to the public, and attending classes became a hobby among the townspeople: education was intended to be truly egalitarian.

The story of education in the twentieth century throughout the UK became the search to extend to all children, and later to all adults, equality of opportunity. Literacy was the cornerstone of that education. In the late twentieth century, the definition of literacy in Scotland expanded to include talking and listening skills and the study of the media, as well as a recognition of the importance of the culture and language of the local community. A unique assessment was designed for schools to achieve equality of opportunity for all children, mirrored by a determination to increase opportunities for late learners in the adult population, and to make Higher Education possible for an increasing number of people.

Today Edinburgh retains its status as a seat of education and is home to three Universities – the University of Edinburgh, Napier University and Heriot-Watt University, all of which are internationally renowned research and teaching centres.



4.



5.



6.

Inspiring a love of reading

Data from a 1996 literacy survey concluded that roughly half of the Scottish population reads books each week. To ensure that this statistic continues to grow, Scottish literature organisations work in partnership with educational programmes and local authorities to promote readership from the earliest ages.

Bookstart is the first national books-for-babies programme in the world. It provides books for every new baby born in the UK and offers advice to parents on sharing books with their children.

J.K. Rowling, a Reading Champion for the Scottish Executive's Home Reading initiative, which encourages parents and carers to share books with children, sums up why this work is so important.

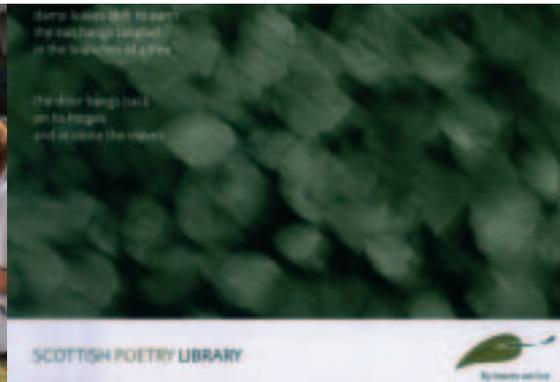
'It's the simplest and most magical thing to turn a page and be transported to a whole new world; see things through someone else's eyes; and learn something you couldn't find out any other way'.

UNESCO's World Book Day was marked in over 30 countries around the globe last year. In the UK, a main aim of the day, celebrated in March, is to encourage children to explore the pleasures of reading by providing them with the opportunity to have a book of their own.

National Poetry Day, celebrated in October, is marked in Scotland by the distribution of half a million free poetry postcards.

4. Storyteller Amu at one of Scotland's many literature festivals

5/6. Deep in books at the Edinburgh International Book Festival



1.

2.

3.

4.

1. Children at an Edinburgh International Book Festival sale
- 2/4. From a series of postcards produced by the Scottish Poetry Library
3. Reading on the lawn at the Edinburgh International Book Festival

Other initiatives aimed at children include the annual Summer Reading Challenge in libraries, in which children are encouraged to read at least six books during the holidays for a medal, and various resources on the web.

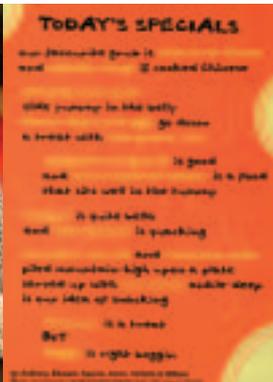
The activities of organisations like Scottish Book Trust, Scottish Storytelling Centre and Scottish Poetry Library range from a touring poetry van to writers' and storytellers' events throughout Scotland. The current Children's Laureate, Michael Morpurgo, visited city centre and remote island schools and libraries all over Scotland in 2004, giving over 6,000 children, teachers and librarians the chance to meet one of the UK's most popular authors.

For those who had a limited initial education, or who missed out on learning to read through other disadvantages, there are a number of projects aimed at enhancing their reading and writing skills. These include CLAN, aimed especially at young adults, those facing redundancy and people with health problems affecting their ability to engage in reading, 'Branching Out', a project to support reader development professionals in delivering their services and 'A Touch Of...', which aims to increase access to literature for the blind.

The enthusiasm of Edinburgh people for literature is demonstrated by the wealth of book, poetry and writing groups in the city. Book groups are mostly private gatherings between friends, but agencies like the City of Edinburgh Library Service organise some of the city's largest reading groups. The Shore Poets meet monthly in an historic Edinburgh tavern to hear readings.



5.



6.



7.

Living through literature

Scotland has a burgeoning number of literary events and festivals that fuel enthusiasm for the written word – according to research, 80,000 people attend two or more literary events in Scotland every year.

The Edinburgh International Book Festival forms the central part of a year-round calendar of literary events across Scotland. Throughout its 21-year history, the Book Festival has grown rapidly in size and scope to become the largest and most dynamic festival of its kind in the world. One of the festival's hallmarks is the series of high profile debates and discussions. Each year writers from all over the world gather to become part of this unique forum in which audience and author meet to exchange thoughts and opinions. Hundreds of leading international writers have been presented at the Book Festival, including Gore Vidal, Alan Bennett, Louis de Bernieres, Seamus Heaney, Doris Lessing, Muriel Spark and Harold Pinter. The Children's Fair is an integral part of the event, and showcases writers and illustrators for young people.

Scotland is well served by literature festivals. An annual poetry festival, StAnza, is held in St Andrews; Cromarty Book Festival in the Highlands; the WORD festival in Aberdeen; Wigtown Book Town Festival celebrates its status as Scotland's National Book Town every September; and the Scottish International Storytelling Festival back in Edinburgh celebrates storytelling traditions from around the world.

- 5. Storywriting at the Edinburgh International Book Festival
- 6. Poem postcard
- 7. Sculpture at Leaderfoot by Garry Tay, poem by Valerie Gillies

Overleaf:
A poster for the third Edinburgh Book Festival, illustrated by Michael Foreman

the third

EDINBURGH
BOOK FESTIVAL
CHARLOTTE SQUARE GARDENS
8-23 AUGUST 1987

