

Andrew Raven Trust weekend, 14th -16th June 2013

Flourishing Children – Childhood, Nature and Community

The theme for each year's Andrew Raven Trust weekend often emerges from a chance remark or a personal reflection made during the course of the previous year's weekend. So it was that the 2012 weekend's exploration of Shared Space provoked not just the theme for 2013 but also inspired two of its participants, [Fiona Carnie](#) and [Evelyn Arizpe](#), to propose themselves as the principle organisers and designers of the 2013 programme. The theme they suggested, Flourishing Children – Childhood, Nature and Community offered the Andrew Raven Trust a new perspective from which to examine our core mission of promoting the principles of sustainable community development in rural Scotland. Drawing on their long and varied experience in the fields of early year's education and children's literature, Fiona and Evelyn curated a programme that was designed both to challenge our preconceptions of childhood and to help us reflect on our collective responsibility to create the sort of environment which children need in order to flourish.

FRIDAY EVENING

As with previous years, after everyone had arrived and settled in, the early part of Friday evening served to set the scene for the rest of the weekend. ART trustees Angus Robertson and Amanda Raven provided some wider context, describing the work of the Ardtornish Estate and the broad aims of the Andrew Raven Trust, while Evelyn and Fiona outlined their hopes and ambitions for the weekend.

We were then invited to allow ourselves to slip back in time and start to reflect more deeply on what childhood means. Firstly, Faith Raven shared with everyone her earliest memories of coming to Ardtornish House, which unsurprisingly seemed rather big and imposing to a very young girl. The dominant figure in her life in those days was Nanny – only catching sight of her mother once or twice a day. She seldom ventured outside the big house but when she did she recalls it as being a 'big adventure'. She recollects food being sourced locally, cooked downstairs but then carried all the way to the family flat at the top of the house. Special treats were not in abundance but the occasional glacier mint held fond memories. Encouraged by Faith's reflections, we then broke into small groups to share with each other, memories of our own childhoods and in particular any important influences that we felt had enabled us to flourish.

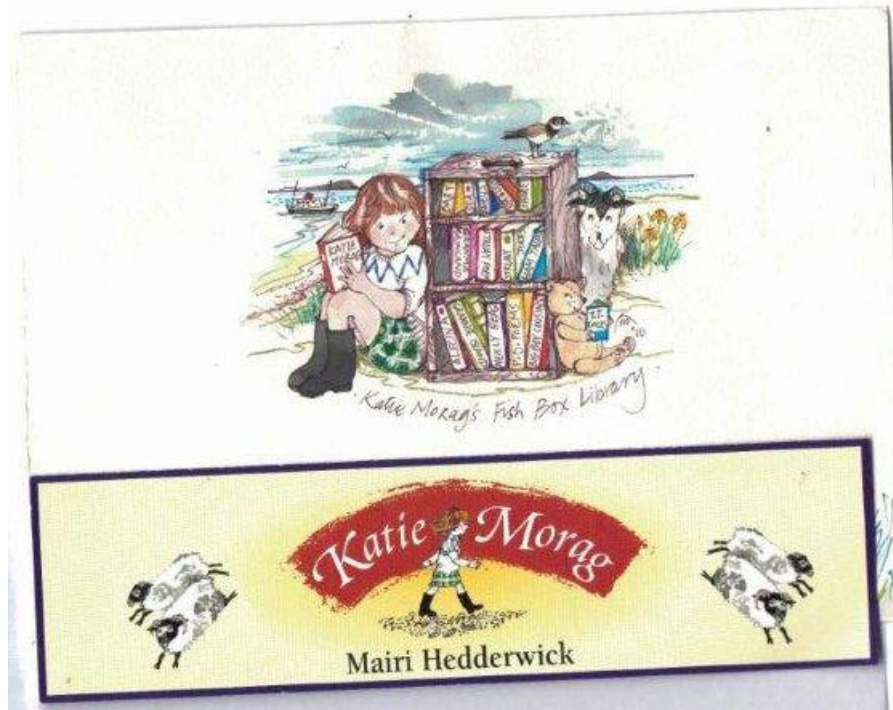
A break for drinks and dinner offered further opportunity for participants to continue these conversations and to learn more about who else was attending the weekend. Of us all, there could be little doubt as to the identity of the best known – Mairi Hedderwick, writer, illustrator and creator of one of Scotland's best known fictional characters, Katie Morag.



Katie Morag. Illustration reproduced courtesy of Mairi Hedderwick

It fell to Mairi to conclude the day with a talk about her work and in particular the story of how the Katie Morag books have developed over the years to the point where they play such an important part in the lives of thousands of children. She surprised everyone by introducing Katie Morag as the literary equivalent of an albatross round her neck - but only in the sense that she feels so closely identified with the Katie Morag character that it has thwarted her other writing aspirations. She described an early school experience in which her artistic talents were first recognised and felt this single incident was hugely significant in shaping her future career. She felt the manner in which the Katie Morag books came into being had been the result of a serendipitous mix of domestic circumstance, location, and the persistence of a perceptive editor.

Mairi provided some fascinating insights into how political correctness, particularly in the early books, had shaped the editorial guidelines that she had had to follow. And now that Katie Morag is about to move from the page onto the television screen, the controls over how a story can be portrayed seem to be even more restrictive. The basic formula which all her stories follow is the same –three key events and a dilemma of some sort which Katie Morag has to resolve. Through her illustrations, subsidiary tales are often told – particularly with the purpose of keeping the adult reader amused. She pointed to the particular trademarks of her books – in particular the importance of sky and sea in all her illustrations. Mairi felt that in the final analysis the Katie Morag phenomenon has been a trade-off between fulfilling her artistic integrity and meeting the commercial imperatives of the industry.



Katie Morag's Fish Box Library. Illustration reproduced courtesy of Mairi Hedderwick

As ever, the day ended with participants making the choice between further conviviality or heading off to bed at a sensible hour in order to conserve energies for the next day.

SATURDAY MORNING

Saturday morning began with a brisk walk up the hill for the more energetic of the party and a guided tour by Angus Robertson of the Ardtornish hydro scheme which is hoped will secure the financial future of the estate.

The day's main keynote address was delivered by Professor Bob Davis of Glasgow University. The title of Bob's talk, Childhood – a philosophical and ecological perspective, suggested that we were about to be taken on an intellectual journey – one that might run the risk of occasionally 'losing' some of his audience along the way but throughout, would provide us with fascinating new insights into the nature of childhood and challenge many of our preconceptions of how we, as human beings, develop. In all of these respects we were not to be disappointed. Bob's talk in its entirety can be listened to [here](#).

The dynamic of the morning then shifted into more participatory mode with everyone moving into smaller groups to reflect on one of three questions. Each group was challenged not only to consider their chosen question but to devise some form of collective presentation which was to be made at the conclusion of the weekend.

The three questions we had to consider were:

1. What are the essential components of childhood experience that enable children to flourish in contemporary society?
2. How do we foster the values, skills and attitudes that enable and encourage young people to make a positive contribution?
3. What can be done to help those in urban environments understand the challenges facing rural landscapes and communities and vice versa?

After initial consideration of these questions in small groups, and before breaking for lunch, we were treated to four brief presentations describing the work of different organisations and the specific approaches each has developed towards working with children and young people. Although very different, what they had in common was an emphasis on building stronger connections between young people and their natural environment:

- **John Muir Trust.** Rob Bushby has responsibility for the John Muir Award scheme – an environmental award scheme focusing on the development of greater awareness and understanding of Britain’s wild places. Aimed at upper primary school age children, 30% of their work targets young people at risk of exclusion from mainstream education. The award is designed around four core challenges : to discover, to explore, to conserve and to share. The scheme is highly flexible and can offer real challenges to a young person’s values as it often pushes at the limits of their experience and personal comfort.
- **Forestry Commission Scotland.** Sally York talked about the Woods for Learning Strategy and the Forest School initiative. She described how Forest School operates on the principle of being led at the pace of the child. Trainers are encouraged to stand back and allow children to explore and discover through their own learning. She challenged the current levels of public anxiety that there seems to be around health and safety and the minimisation of risk, suggesting that exposure to risk often presents tremendous learning opportunities. In relation to bad weather for instance, she was insistent that there is no such thing – just inadequate clothing.
- **Carly Bagelman**, a PhD student at Glasgow University, described some work she had become involved in in the north end of Vancouver Island with groups of First Nation children. The context for this project was in response to the cultural genocide that had been visited upon these native bands in the relatively recent past. Her work focused on helping these children to reclaim some of their traditional practices with a focus on local food and other cultural references. As their traditional language had been so aggressively stamped out, the power of the elders’ recollections has been crucial to this work and in particular, a focus on their relationship to the natural world. Within their culture, nature and in particular how it provides local food is recognised as being the ultimate repository of learning.
- **Sam Harrison** described his work with Open Ground, a placed based learning consultancy. Sam described his work as constantly revisiting the same place - but all the while, stepping out of those ‘same old grooves’. He is interested in getting young people to consider more deeply how they come to belong in a given place and to ask questions of their immediate environment. Sam showed a short film that illustrated his work – The Battle of Loch Tromlee and explained that how acting out these historic roles that were portrayed in the film had enhanced the children’s understanding of their landscape.

SATURDAY AFTERNOON

As in previous weekends, Saturday afternoon is a chance to get out and about to visit different sites within the community. Three different activities were on offer. One group headed off to the community managed woodland which is used by many different groups from within the wider community. We heard how the woods have recently been used as a setting for Shakespeare productions, the development of woodland skills and knowledge, and as an outdoors classroom by the local nursery school who moved into the woodland for an extended period of six weeks. A second group set out for the newly built local primary school in the village of Lochaline where they discussed plans for development of the school's grounds.

The third group had elected to stay in the house and join in with a workshop which Catrin Webster, a freelance painter and educator, had been running throughout the day with a group of young people. We were to learn more about what happened with this group later in the day.

After everyone had returned from their afternoon activities, we settled down for a panel discussion involving Catrin, Craig Biddick, Headteacher of Tobermory High School and three of his senior students. Catrin explained that her workshop had been designed to explore the meaning of landscape, and in this case the immediate environment around the house, through the medium of print. The output of the workshop had been a series of print books which had been laid out on display.

In the afternoon, when adult participants joined the workshop, a key element of the experience was for the young people to take responsibility for teaching the adults how to use the print process. Reflecting on this experience, (adult) participants reported how relaxing and secure it had made them feel when responsibility for the teaching had been passed to the young people. It was also noted that just being able to play without concern for the consequences was accompanied by a huge sense of relief and fun.

Craig expressed his view that all learning should be fun – even in secondary school with all the attendant pressures of exams. Asked what would really enhance their school experience, the senior students thought that the presence of a particular adult within the school whom they could trust and whom they knew would be proactive in checking how they were coping. In terms of how they had perceived the workshop experience, they were surprised at the sense of freedom and satisfaction they had felt in being able to take control of the process of teaching the adults.

Before breaking for dinner, participants returned to their groups of Friday evening to further reflect on their set questions and began to prepare for their presentations the following day.

Stimulated and challenged by all that we had heard, seen and spoken about during the course a long day, drinks were served and followed by another superb dinner prepared by the local White House Restaurant. As has become the custom of these weekends, those with the inclination and musical talent produced an array of fiddles, flutes and guitars and set about providing the evening's entertainment.

SUNDAY MORNING

For anyone feeling slightly delicate from the effects of a late night, Sunday's main speaker, Julie Wilson, of Education Scotland was to provide the perfect antidote. The theme of her talk centred on the notion of adventure and its importance in the design of play. Her talk was peppered with references to the key influences in the field of play and active learning – in particular the work of Bob Hughes in relation to play theory. Her main argument relates to the fact that the world is becoming increasingly complex and children are being expected to weave some degree of order out of the chaos. She believes that the education system as it stands is fundamentally ill-equipped to meet this challenge but that early years play can be a crucial tool in helping young people to build the resilience they will need.

She pointed to the playgrounds of Berlin as a model for everyone to follow. These playgrounds do not contain any prescribed structures for children that determine how they should be played with – there are simply a series of subtle provocations which encourage children to lead their own learning. Research is showing that this approach to play has had a highly significant impact on learning in the classroom.

Perhaps inspired by Julie's talk and her emphasis on the importance of adventure, everyone then returned for a final discussion within their groups to prepare for the presentations that were to follow. Consistent with the theme of the weekend, we had been encouraged to be imaginative and playful in how we decided to make our presentations.

True to the spirit of the task, all three groups conjured up some novel ways to convey the substance of their deliberations.

- The first group had looked at what the essential components of childhood experience are that enable children to flourish, and they used the mediums of music, beat and harmonies to reinforce their key messages. In particular the importance of song and stories in play, of there being a sense of freedom, of having enough time, of being part of a community, of being heard and being communicated with.
- The second group had considered how to foster the skills and attributes that enable young people to make a positive contribution. The medium they chose was more theatrical in style and reflected how positive and negative influences as experienced by a young person can impact in terms of their self-esteem and the extent to which they feel cherished by those around them.
- The third group was asked to consider how they could help those who live in an urban environment better understand the challenges facing those who live in a rural setting and vice versa. The device this group adopted was to ask everyone else to consider the two settings (rural and urban) as being at either end of a continuum. Inviting everyone outside onto the lawn, it was explained that this continuum ran between two points that had been set out in a line. By describing a particular challenge (without ascribing it to either urban or rural living), everyone was asked to move themselves to the point they thought was most appropriate on the continuum. The point of the exercise was to illustrate that while the physical settings may differ, the challenges young people have to face remain remarkably similar.

The final session on Sunday is always given over to an open discussion – an opportunity for anyone who would like to share a reflection on what they have heard or what they feel they will take away from the weekend.

These are a few of the unattributed comments made:

- “I am much more conscious that we are having to reinvent ourselves for a future that we cannot know”
- “We have heard from some leading edge speakers but there has been an energy throughout the weekend which could be captured and built upon”
- “The bonus (of the weekend) is there is no fixed agenda, no outputs required – just a journey”
- “It has been immensely restorative and rejuvenating – equivalent of a sugar rush”
- “What I have heard has strengthened my conviction to rethink my practice”
- “That the simple voice without images can be a hugely effective means of communication”

Judy Lin Wong shared a poem that she had written and which she felt was in accord with the spirit of the weekend. She called the poem *Everything Alive*.

Judy then asked everyone to join her in a practice that she had learned from a group of 13-14 year old Bangladeshi girls in the mountains of Pakistan, who were given the task of creating something that expressed the power of sharing and unity. This exercise is impossible to convey in words but for everyone involved, it made for an unexpectedly powerful moment with which to bring the weekend to its conclusion.

More formal farewells and thanks were to follow, before everyone headed off in the direction of ferries and home.

Angus Hardie, ART Trustee