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Cities in Scotland: Cultural Heritage and National Identity

Interview – A Literature House for Edinburgh

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Interview – A Literature House for Edinburgh

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Introduction

- 1 In 2004, Edinburgh became the first city to receive the UNESCO designation “World City of Literature”. Since then, the Cities of Literature programme has developed as one key strand in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, which encompasses 295 cities across 72 countries and covers seven cultural areas. There are now 42 Cities of Literature throughout the world, ranging alphabetically from Angoulême to Wrocław and geographically spread across all the continents (with the unfortunate exception of Antarctica).
- 2 Each City of Literature has its own unique dynamics, relating its literary heritage and ongoing life to its broader history, its socio-economic circumstances, and its place within local and national determinants of identity, and Edinburgh is no exception. As the capital of the ancient nation of Scotland the city has long been noted for its writers, and this literary identity has become part of the way in which the city presents itself to the world. It has three major public libraries, two of which – the National Library of Scotland and Edinburgh Central Library – face each other across a road at the heart of the Old Town (the third is the Edinburgh University Library, which has been in continuous existence since the late 1500s). It holds an annual International Book Festival, one of the main such events in the global calendar. It possesses a Writers’ Museum, housed in a reconstructed seventeenth-century house gifted to the city in 1907, which celebrates three of the best-known Edinburgh and Scottish writers, Walter Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Robert Burns. Outside the museum sits Makar’s Court, a square inset with paving stones marked with the names and words of a whole series of Scotland’s writers over the centuries.
- 3 As it approaches the twentieth anniversary as a City of Literature, the Trust responsible for looking after the designation has been reassessing its work and its plans. It feels

that the time is right to try and establish a different kind of literary institution in the city – one which tells a broader story than is available in the Writers' Museum, that focuses on books as much as on writers, and that will provide a home for literary events and activities throughout the eleven months of the year when the Book Festival is not running. The plans to develop that institution have been in development for three years, and are now edging closer to fruition.

Could you tell us about the original intention – towards authors and the city – for creating a Literature House?

The original plan for the Literature House arose from both a sense of what the city of Edinburgh might need in terms of literary infrastructure, and from the awareness of possibilities derived from involvement in the Creative Cities network. Literature Houses are familiar institutions in some cities across Europe and North America, in particular, but they are not part of the way in which people in the UK have engaged either with literary heritage or the literary present. The latter is most obviously evident in book festivals, book prizes, and promotional events run by bookshops, though we should not overlook the growth of book clubs over the last two decades as a hugely significant grassroots readerly activity. But these most prominent forms of literary engagement are occasional, rather than institutional, with all the limitations of that, and often driven by the demands of publishers for the marketing and promotion of individual books. This can create some extremely engaging and dynamic events, which are obviously highly valued by participants, but it doesn't necessarily sustain a broader culture in any particularly focused way. Meanwhile, literary heritage is largely focused on museums created, for the most part, within the houses of former writers, and dedicated to the explication and presentation of their lives as much as, if not more than, their books. Sometimes, as at Scott's house at Abbotsford, and Burns' Cottage in Alloway, the original domestic space has been complemented by a permanent exhibition, but again primarily focused on the life and times of the writer. The proposal for a Literature House would bring some of these aspects together in a single institution with a permanent exhibition and an integrated programme of activities, offered year-round to local and visiting audiences. It would also create a community space for this part of Edinburgh's Old Town, and a jumping off point for literature-focused walking tours or self-guided travel throughout the city. It would also provide an information gateway to other literary activities and heritage sites throughout Scotland.

What has been your role in the project?

Our involvement with this project has been primarily in thinking through the possibilities for a permanent exhibition dedicated to telling the story of Edinburgh as a city of literature. We came on board because of our experience in creating an online literary map of Edinburgh composed of 50,000 excerpts from books set in the city geolocated to the places they mentioned. This project gave us invaluable insight into how the 'literariness' of a city might be understood speculatively, and how it is in fact understood empirically, by both writers and readers. What we also learned from this project was how to reconcile the provision of informational abundance – which digital capabilities make so easy – with the user's need for navigability and intelligibility, without sacrificing the one for the other. This experience has been crucial in developing principles and proposals for the interpretation of Edinburgh's literary story within the Literature House.

What does the Literature House tell us of the City of Literature and the Literary Nation?

The primary aim of the Literature House is to tell the story of literary Edinburgh, and by extension, some of Scotland's literary story. One might imagine the literary city as a synecdoche of the literary nation, although the city inevitably cannot speak fully for the nation. Scottish literature has more often been associated with the countryside and small towns than its capital city, especially since the twentieth century when writers of the Scottish Literary Renaissance – including Hugh MacDiarmid, Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Willa Muir, and others – worked to construct a narrative of cultural identity rooted in rural and small-town settings, away from the capital. And yet, even in MacDiarmid's poetry, Edinburgh looms large as “a mad god's dream”, emblematic of the “Caledonian antiszyzy”, or union of opposites, that is understood as a key feature of Scottish literature. The Literature House exhibitions and events will convey a story of Edinburgh literature that considers carefully the city's role as cultural capital of an ancient nation and conveys the polyvocality of its urban literary landscape. We can think of the city as a palimpsest – a page upon which text is inscribed and re-inscribed – a multi-layered record of narrative that form the heart of the city's identity. The Literature House will showcase the various ways that storytellers have imagined Edinburgh over time, and how stories themselves have helped shape the imaginative life of the city. The literary city is diverse and dynamic, in constant flux, as is Scottish literature more broadly. The Literature House will capture this openness by setting forgotten narratives and authors alongside those more well known, and providing a home and hub for the work of contemporary authors contributing to Edinburgh's and Scotland's developing cultural identity.

How does the Literature House address questions of inclusion and exclusion?

Edinburgh is a divided city, a city of opposites. These are written into its architectural fabric, and its cultural history: Old Town versus New Town, High Street versus Cowgate, the Jekyll of prim respectability and the Hyde of dark, unruly passions. Its writers have often played on this duality in their work, but for a project like ours it presents a challenge, since social divisions are written into the way in which the city works. There is plenty of comfortable wealth in Edinburgh, the lawyers and financiers, and there are the 'left behind' communities of Leith, or Muirhouse, or Wester Hailes. In addition, Edinburgh is home to migrant and refugee communities from different parts of the world, including most recently exiles from Hong Kong and Ukrainians fleeing the war in their country. Literature means very different things to Edinburgh's diverse populace, particularly since we are a city with three native languages, English, Scots, and Gaelic. The difference between Scots and English, especially, is also inflected by class, meaning that these languages don't have parity of esteem or status. Our attempts to tell 'the story' of Edinburgh as a city of literature risk reproducing the narrow narratives of old which privilege and perpetuate the same perspectives and hierarchies. One of the key opportunities for us in this context, though, is that we are not a museum, nor an archive – we have no collection of items that come with cultural baggage and around which we are obliged to orientate our self-presentation. We start with a blank slate; we will be looking to ensure that we can create *multum in parvo*, polyvocal stories that our audiences can navigate in ways that suit their needs and interests. The affordances of digital interaction and engagement will be crucial here, creating frameworks and structures

for an informational multiplicity within navigable bounds. We will also be focused in our events and exhibition programming on our wish to speak to, and hear from, the multiple communities of Edinburgh. We are formulating ways of structuring engagement with Edinburgh's literary stories that will take those stories beyond our walls, but with the hope also of bringing the varying stories told by the city's communities back into the frames we are creating.

In your sense, how does the Literature House allow us to think of the future of (literary) heritage?

As the Literature House is not accountable to a fixed collection of artifacts, it has an opportunity to explore the city's literary story in a different way from other heritage institutions. The term heritage implies a backward view, preservation of an already written history. In contrast, the Literature House will engage both residents and visitors in a dynamic programme of exhibitions and events that represents Edinburgh's literary culture as a diverse and ever-changing body of narratives. Digital interfaces and interactions afford the capability of shifting the Literature House's offerings as the literary culture develops. It will also provide a home for contemporary authors, facilitating that development. But perhaps most significantly, as a hub for literary activities and programming that extend out to and back in from communities outside the city centre, the Literature House aims to practice "heritage from below", rather than presenting an institutional version of literary history. In this sense, it will be a work of cultural making or remaking, rather than reflecting a status quo of canonical Scottish literature.

APPENDIXES

Further information

Edinburgh City of Literature: <https://cityofliterature.com>

Edinburgh International Book Festival: <https://www.edbookfest.co.uk>

Litlog: Edinburgh. *Palimpsest Project*, <https://litlong.org/welcome>

UNESCO Creative Cities Network: <https://en.unesco.org/creative-cities>

The Writer's Museum: <https://www.edinburghmuseums.org.uk/venue/writers-museum>

ABSTRACTS

This interview explores the rationale and plans for the creation of a Literature House in Edinburgh, which was the first location to be designated a UNESCO World City of Literature and is seeking to find the best ways to curate and promote its literary past and present in order to foster its future.

Cet entretien explore le fondement et le processus de création d'une maison de la littérature à Édimbourg, laquelle a été la première ville désignée comme ville mondiale de la littérature par l'UNESCO. Édimbourg cherche les meilleurs moyens de conserver et de promouvoir son passé et son présent littéraires afin de garantir son avenir.

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Mots-clés: Édimbourg, Écosse, littérature, patrimoine littéraire, communauté, littérature nationale, littérature numérique

Keywords: Edinburgh, Scotland, literature, literary heritage, community, national literature, digital literature

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