

STORYTELLING IN WEXFORD

A summary report and recommendations by Dr Donald Smith, Director of the Scottish Storytelling Centre on his visit to the 2004 Wexford Storytelling Festival

A. Introduction

Having never visited County Wexford before I was very impressed by the gentle rolling beauty of its countryside, its winding rivers, the variety and interest of the towns, and its extensive coastline. I was also delighted by the hospitality and warm welcome of all those involved in Wexford storytelling including Lar O'Brien, Bob Lambert and other mainstays of the Storytelling Houses as well as the library staff who looked after me so well, particularly Fionnuala Hanrahan and Jarlath Glynn.

B. Impressed First Impressions

Storytelling in Wexford is thriving because of strong community support expressed through the Storytelling Houses and because of the active and energetic commitment of Wexford Library Service to taking storytelling into schools and all parts of Wexford.

What is happening in Wexford is distinctive and special, in national and international terms, because of this combination. This leads to my first two broad introductory recommendations

1. that Wexford County and all the participating partners re-affirm the value and distinctiveness of storytelling in Wexford
2. that, in underlining the past achievements that have created the present situation, all parties look to fully exploit present strengths and encourage new developments for the future.

These should be seen as prefacing and underpinning the specific recommendations in section D. Key Strategic Areas

C. Exploring Wexford Storytelling

During my visit I was able, thanks to the good organisation and generous hospitality of my hosts, to immerse myself in all aspects of the Wexford Storytelling Festival.

1. I attended storytelling events in Wexford and at Bunclody Storytelling House and participated in both adult and family sessions
2. I undertook a tour of Storytelling House venues - existing and under construction- with the knowledgeable guidance of Bob Lambert and Lar O'Brien
3. I shared stories with the library staff who were organising the festival
4. I met with the library staff who were organising the festival.
5. I facilitated a seminar at Enniscorthy Library relating international practice to Wexford storytelling. The seminar was attended by a good cross section of both library staff and organisers of Storytelling Houses.

D. Key Strategic Areas

The seminar was critical in enabling us as a group to reflect on present activity and plan for the future. The following were identified as key strands for strategic consideration, while recognising the mutuality and interweaving of the themes:

1. Traditions and contexts of storytelling in Wexford, including the Wexford Festival
2. Children, families and schools
3. Older people and cross-generational communication
4. Tourism
5. Local studies: history, environment and folklore

1. Traditions and Contexts

It was agreed that the Storytelling Festival and activity throughout the year assisted each other. The 'storytelling ceilidh' format of the Houses with their host provided the main context of storytelling in Wexford, but the Festival encouraged events in the larger towns and in schools.

It was recommended that:

- a) the Festival continue to encourage exchanges and visits with other storytelling traditions both to widen awareness of Wexford storytelling and to learn about other cultural approaches
- b) that the sharing of skills between storytellers be encouraged through informal workshops
- c) that the Storytelling Houses be considered as venues for possible children's and family events, as well as the traditional sessions
- d) that new urban as well as rural venues and events be encouraged during the Storytelling Festival - these events would not necessarily use the 'storytelling ceilidh' format
- e) that different combinations of music and storytelling be considered in Festival events

From my own external perspective I would wish to endorse all those points agreed at the seminar and add the following observations:

- while the Storytelling Houses ceilidh format is the backbone of Wexford storytelling it cannot be expected to fulfil all the needs and objectives for storytelling. It should be encouraged in its own right but other kinds of events and approaches are needed for different age groups and social contexts
- the Festival's presence in Wexford and other towns should be reviewed. Family events are already a success here but I feel that a pub crawl is a risky kind of opening event, potentially reflecting a low view of the art of stories and storytelling. I am also unsure whether transferring the Ceilidh House format to Wexford Library is the right closing event - perhaps such an event could open the festival with a greater emphasis on selected tellers and music for the final event? Such events could also be themed around aspects of

Wexford life and history and/or cultures represented through visiting storytellers.

2. *Children, Families and Schools*

It was agreed that there is a great potential for increasing storytelling in schools and at special community and family events/occasions throughout the year. Such events could include traditional storytellers, storyteller-authors, and stories told by children and young people.

It was recommended that the Library Service work closely with the schools and central education support services to encourage storytelling in curricular and extra-curricular contexts.

From my own perspective I strongly endorse the seminar's recommendation emphasising the potential of storytelling to foster

- imagination and creativity (stories stimulating verbal, visual and aural imagination)
- language skills and confidence
- environmental education
- personal and social development
- religious and moral education.

3. *Older People and Cross-Generational Communication*

Storytelling is a two-way form of communication that shares experiences between the generations. It was recommended that, given the rapid social changes in Wexford, the potential of storytelling in this regard should be explored. It was felt important that the activities of Storytelling Houses reach out to the schools and families. It was also felt that more could be done to involve isolated and frail elderly members of the community including those in day or residential care.

From my external perspective I would stress the importance of recognising the talents of children and young people within the storytelling movement in Wexford. While the seminar affirmed this objective it was not clear on that day how this might be taken forward. However, it was clear that a variety of projects or initiatives could emerge and that one pattern should not be expected to fit all the different local circumstances and personnel. Possible ways forward might include

- a storyteller in residence in Wexford
- a small incentive fund to support local projects working with children and young people and/or older people
- consideration of storytelling within a wider library strategy for children and families in community settings
- consideration of the potential of Life Stories (memory and reminiscence) projects to involve older community members, valuing their experiences and allowing them to be shared. Training in listening/storytelling/sharing skills might be developed and offered to staff and community volunteers.

4. *Tourism*

It was agreed that telling Wexford's stories was an important ingredient of promoting the Wexford story to a wider public of visitors nationally and internationally. It was therefore recommended that

- Storytelling Houses and events should be widely provided as a Wexford attraction
- web-site listings of storytelling events be established and regularly updated
- an annual storytelling calendar be developed adding to existing peaks (summer Storytelling Houses, the Festival) by looking at regular occasions round which storytelling events could be organised. These might include historical commemorations, Saints Days, summer schools, urban and rural storytelling tours, music and storytelling, celebrations of special places and buildings within communities, etc.

From my external perspective I would comment that storytelling in Wexford is not just a niche attraction but something that Wexford can sell as a distinctive strength.

5. *Local Studies*

It was agreed that Wexford had impressive resources in its local history environment and special collections. Much had been researched but even more was still to research. It was felt, however, that these assets were not sufficiently widely known and appreciated. It was therefore recommended that a sense of place and of community pride could be further encouraged through

- themed storytelling events
- walking (and car/coach) tours
- classes, courses and summer schools, perhaps organised with education partners
- local projects exploring and recording history and traditions
- continuing encouragement of the use of local studies collections and resources by storytellers, teachers and the general public.

From my external perspective I was very impressed by the sterling work of the Library Service and of organisations such as the Wexford Historical Society and the Father Murphy Centre in the field of local studies. New developments in further and higher education in Wexford could (should?) provide an education champion to promote local studies and further increase the profile of Wexford's distinctive heritage.

E. Conclusion

I have deliberately structured my report around the seminar at Enniscorthy Library because it was the main opportunity to bring together key local parties and external perspectives. The programme and ideas laid out by the seminar are valuable because they are the result of discussion and shared reflection and I believe that they offer an excellent basis for flexible development over the next three to five years. However, realising even some of the huge potential of storytelling for Wexford requires:

- sustained cooperative working between all parties as demonstrated at the seminar
- an expanded support structure within the Library service to administrate current activities and enable growth

It is not part of the remit of this report to consider finance, but clearly resources are required to support and enable the voluntary and community effort that makes Wexford storytelling such a special asset to grow in the future.

The last word goes to Councillor Anna Fenlon, Deputy Chair of Wexford County Council, speaking on the final night of the 204 Storytelling Festival,

The Library Service sees the power of storytelling in bringing children to reading, in developing communication skills, in supporting family life across generations, in validating the life experience of older members of the community, in recording elements of local folklore ... The list goes on and on. Storytelling is an important aspect of the heritage and contemporary life of County Wexford. It deserves its celebration.

The Scottish Storytelling Centre
January 2005