fèis

the first twenty-five years of the fèis movement
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edited by Kate Martin

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a’ toirt ar dualchais
do ar n-òigridh
giving our culture to
our young people
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Tha sinn fada nur comain.
As a Community Education Worker with Highland Council, Kate Martin co-founded Fèis Rois and Fèis Lochabair and supported the fèis movement during her secondment to HIE’s HI Light Arts project. A founder member and secretary of Feis nan Gàidheal, Kate volunteered to co-ordinate this 25th anniversary publication as a result of her ongoing enthusiasm for the work of the fèisean. Kate now lectures in Community Education at the University of Dundee.

For Flora

MAP OF THE FÈISEAN, 2006

Feis Alba has been held in various locations throughout the Highlands and Islands.
The fèis story is that of a national success founded on artistic excellence, community involvement and the power of the arts to enhance the lives of young people. Key to this has been the opportunity for the organisation to grow and develop over a long period of time. The Scottish Arts Council’s investment has paid off when we see a generation of youngsters now performing, teaching and contributing to our social and economic well being, and to the sustainability of the Gaelic language. Here’s to the next 25 years!

Jim Tough, Director of Arts, Scottish Arts Council

It gives me great pleasure to be able to add a few words at the beginning of this book. I am genuinely pleased to have been associated with the work of Fèisean nan Gàidheal over the years.

I have had a number of opportunities for contact with fèisean, working with both the Scottish Executive and before that with Highland Council. At every point I have been very impressed with the vitality and appeal of the fèis and the positive effect on those who attended.

The fèis movement is now an established and valued part of Scottish cultural life and we should all be proud of its success. It has made an immense contribution to the lives of many young people and has strengthened both traditional music and the Gaelic language throughout Scotland.

I think we need to acknowledge that Fèisean nan Gàidheal has contributed to a major change in Scottish cultural life and the fèis movement has probably had a much wider impact than we can measure. From its very modest origins Fèisean nan Gàidheal has experienced sustained growth, it has expanded into many areas of Scotland and its commitment to Gaelic remains undiminished.

The Gaelic arts and culture now have a high profile in Scotland and are a very important feature of our cultural life. We must never forget that it is the Gaelic language which is at the heart of this. It is the key to the survival of this culture and as such it must be protected.

The fèis movement has clearly kept the language at the heart of its activity and I believe that it is one of the best examples we have for promoting confidence in the Gaelic language. It is initiatives such as this that are needed to give Gaelic speakers the confidence to use and pass on their language and thus create a sustainable future for Gaelic in Scotland.

I would like to thank all those who have worked with and for the fèisean, for their energy and their commitment. They should be proud of their achievement. I would also like to commend those bodies which have supported Fèisean nan Gàidheal over the years. They should be pleased with the result of their investment in the organisation. This is indeed a success story.

Peter J Peacock, Minister for Education and Young People and Gaelic

The fèis movement is now an established and valued part of Scottish cultural life...
The first Gaelic féis was held on the island of Barra in 1981, involving 120 children in learning the song, music and dance of their native Gaelic culture. Twenty-five years later, there are over forty féisean located throughout the Highlands and Islands and beyond, with some 13,000 young people involved in traditional Gaelic arts tuition each year.

Féis in Scottish Gaelic means ‘festival’ or ‘feast’. Specifically, the term has come to mean a community-run cultural tuition festival for children and young people which celebrates the music, song and dance, customs and arts of the Gaelic language culture.

There are currently around 60,000 Gaelic speakers in Scotland, representing less than 1.5% of the population. Steady erosion of the Gaelic language in Scotland over the past 250 years means that the arts heritage associated with the language has declined to a critical point. Those involved in establishing the early féisean were concerned that the traditional songs, music and dance in areas of the Highlands and Islands were fast disappearing and that there were limited opportunities for children to learn these traditional art forms.

In 2005 the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act granted the language improved status, as a result of sustained campaigning by many individuals and Gaelic organisations. The féisean have played their part in this support by raising awareness of Gaelic and introducing children to positive experiences of the language and its arts expressions.

Over the past quarter century the growth of the féisean movement has become a remarkable success story. The aim of this book is to celebrate that achievement by presenting some of the experiences, views and images of people who have contributed to the work of the féisean.
feisean in the past twenty-five years. The Gaelic tradition of storytelling is reflected in the conversational, first person style of contributions, which also represents voices of the many people involved in the feisean. Local Gaelic dialectal variations have also been preserved in these voices, which accounts for the different treatment of certain Gaelic words by individuals.

This book is a social account of the development of a network of community-based initiatives described by people who participated in this process. Invitations for contributions to the project were made to all feisean and to supporters of the movement, backed up with general invitations through the media. Approaches were made to each feis and to individuals for recorded interviews, which were then transcribed. Contributors were given the opportunity to write or be interviewed in either Gaelic or English. Where contributions are in Gaelic, short summaries are provided.

The first chapter concerns the situation of arts, social development and Gaelic in the Highlands and Islands during the 1980s. Calum MacDonald, founder member of Runrig, begins with an overview of growing up as a Gaelic musician before the feisean were in place. The chapter continues with contributions from key players in social and cultural development at that time, charting the roles of the Highlands and Islands Development Board and the Scottish Arts Council in encouraging the movement.

Contributions from the feisean form the next three chapters. These are arranged by decade, with individual feisean in chronological order according to the year of their formation. The development of Feisean nan Gàidheal is discussed in chapter five, with views from some of the many feis tutors, in chapter six. Chapter seven includes extracts from The Participants’ Story, a 2005 study conducted by RSAMD, and looks at some of the research carried out on the feisean over the years. Sheena Wellington, the well-known traditional Scots singer introduces chapter eight, which looks at some ideas for future development of the feisean drawn from interviews with contributors.

The feisean are about young people and music. Music is a social activity, which is about creative expression and communication of ideas, feelings and emotions, past and future values and perspectives on life. Music can reflect its place of origin and evoke an experience of belonging to that place, and yet forms part of a global language. The feisean offer opportunities to young people to actively create music, which builds experience of co-operative working, trust, shared beliefs, creating collective achievement and confidence. In addition, participation in celebration and regeneration of local arts and culture is helping to build stronger communities.

The Gaelic culture underpins much that is considered to be Scottish in the traditional arts, and the feisean have recognised that enhancing the origins of this culture has a beneficial effect on Scottish heritage. The feisean are encouraging provision of Gaelic and traditional arts education, which in turn has an impact on Scottish cultural confidence, and on an appreciation of other cultures.

The final words of the former Scottish parliament on May 1st 1707 were ‘here’s tae the end o ane auld sang’. Three hundred years later, a reconvened parliament presents an opportunity for Scotland’s young people to be confident and enthusiastic about their culture, their country and its future. So here’s to ane new sang – òran ùr – a new song, which young people in the feisean are singing out, loud and clear.

Kate Martin, July 2006
1: the early years

We were a generation, angry but inspired, and desperate to reclaim a heritage

CALUM MACDONALD  
Songwriter and founder member of Runrig

‘Gaelic road signs are a ridiculous idea; totally unnecessary – we don’t need them. They are only going to confuse the tourists and they’ll cause accidents.’ So the debate raged within Highland Region throughout the 1970s; the establishment versus the activists. However the argument was not about money, road signs or car crashes – it was a debate highlighting a political attitude to Gaelic that has been endemic and that has raged for centuries.

Having recently undergone a 30th anniversary with Runrig, we have been through a time of looking back and assessing our own particular journey. The fèis movement is a milestone along the same continuum and I thought I might share some thoughts about the musical and cultural world that existed before the fèisean blazed their trail across the north. I’m sure many youngsters today could scarce believe the dry, arid place that existed in previous decades.

As a child growing up both in the Uists and Skye in the 1960s, Gaelic music was becalmed, living off past glories. Protestant communities still in the shadow of the Reformation (it is telling that the first fèis was held in Barra) kept the flag of culture flying but not with musical accompaniment. In Uist I never saw a fiddle, far less heard one – the accordion was the instrument of the village dances and the weddings. Only piping survived the ravages of Calvin, but only for those wearing the kilt and a member of the club. We were the Bakelite generation, post céilidh-house, pre-television. We sat connected to the outside world – we listened in – transfixed to radio and we later walked the moor roads and machairs with transistors, as jazz gave way to skiffle, skiffle gave way to Elvis. Then it all came like a flood: the Pop Revolution, Radio Luxembourg, The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. The genie was well and truly out of the half-bottle, and for the affections and ears of young adolescent Gaels of the time, I’m afraid Calum Kennedy stood no chance.

My whole school experience was ablaze with life altering sounds. It started with Hank Marvin twanging out Apache and ended as Alan Stivell and Fairport Convention injected electricity...
into jigs and reels. In music class we were given recorders, taught how to differentiate between a minim and a crotchet and made to sing from a collection of English folk songs, as our hard of hearing teacher leathered away on the piano. We would sing up at the end of the lesson to drown out the bell. Double maths was next and Bobby Shafto has had a lot to answer for.

Gaelic secular song still survived within the oral tradition, but for a lot of my generation Gaelic was the language of our parents and though song was tolerated and enjoyed in its own place, it held no relevance as far as artistic connection was concerned. We grew our hair and looked to America, London and Liverpool for musical elation. We wanted to write songs for the beat generation and the Civil Rights Movement; ones that could be introduced by Alan Freeman on Top of the Pops. We could not wait to get away to the cities, (there was a much greater distance between Glasgow and Skye back then) and that was where meaningful culture lay.

But you need to get away to appreciate what you have left behind and it was the student experience that prompted a personal turnaround. For Runrig this was the environment that spawned our aspirations. For me there were two events that took me back culturally to the Gàidhealtachd. Firstly as a young student I went to a family wedding in Glasgow where my mother’s cousin, the great Angus Macleod was singing. I’d heard Angus sing many times before but it never connected until that night. The next day I went out and bought his LP, A Night with Angus. It was the first time I had really listened to Gaelic song and it made me want to write one. Secondly, and probably more importantly, I started reading my own history through the telling pens of writers such as John Prebble, James Hunter, Iain Fraser Grigor and Iain Crichton Smith. Like many others I was outraged, not just at the historical facts, but at the cultural neglect of having gone through an educational system that completely ignored the teaching of our own history.

In so many different areas the time was right. A student revolt began…well sort of. Not quite up to standards of the Paris student riots of the era, but nevertheless a few hardy souls from Glasgow University’s Ossianic Society along with other like minded revolutionaries, self consciously held up banners outside the BBC demanding more broadcasting commitment for the language. Some of those instrumental in taking to the barricades are now running the place.

Young people were starting to get politicised. John McGrath’s play The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil performed by the 7.84 Theatre Group, made a huge impression throughout the Highland village halls. On Skye, the radical, landlord-bashing West Highland Free Press, which also shared a 30th anniversary in 2003, was making overtures for cultural regeneration. We were a generation, angry but inspired, and desperate to reclaim a heritage.

Music slowly came out of the shadows – traditional Gaelic songs were getting dressed up in acoustic guitars and harmonies. It was the age of the Gaelic Folk Groups. Most significant of these was
the group Na h-Oganaich who incorporated the songwriting of Murdo MacFarlane: the first bard from the old order to become a songwriter as we would now define it. The National Mod was fast becoming the butt of all dissatisfaction. The young were now confident enough to criticise and point to its failings. Its image in a style conscious era, an embarrassment: the slavish use of national dress for all competitions, the singing style pickled in years of competition singing, the lack of creativity. But so what, the crack was good and, after all, it’s what the Gaels are good at. The National Mod laughed it off and carried on doing what it does best – being the National Mod – and it has enjoyed more anniversaries than anyone! No, the Mod did not move Gaelic music forward one inch, it kept it alive in a strict framework, as it still does, but now there are no expectations of it. We have many talented musicians and artists who can break out, and more importantly there is an opportunity for them to do so. We can now enjoy the Mod for all it’s what the Gaels are good at.

Throughout the late 50s, the 60s and 70s the impact of Gaelic song was virtually non-existent on the national or international stage. As the folk revival took hold across America and eventually planted itself in the smoky folk clubs of Britain, it is to the abiding image of beer-bellied men, sweaters and proclamations from Red Clydeside that we go for reference. Gaelic was simply not at the table, nobody really knew of its riches and there was the ongoing bias and stereotyping that a linguistically divided country has always struggled with. Only the discerning would pick up on Barra’s Flora MacNeil, as her pioneering voice was taken to the radio microphone and later to the recording studio by Gaelic’s first BBC Radio producer, Fred MacAulay. People in the wider folk world took note. It was a small step, but small steps are important.

Any significant change and any big idea has to come from the grass roots, from the people on the ground and be allowed to grow. That is the prime reason why the fèis movement has been so successful. The other, in my opinion, is that it has the Gaelic language at its spiritual heart. Its success is inevitably in the hands of the calibre of the organisers in each locality, but as an organisation it has unlocked the doors to the establishment – it has won the affections of government, local and national and it is winning the constant battle for funding and political accessibility. Can you believe that the Scottish Arts Council is finally opening its sporran to give some assistance to Scottish traditional music? The times they certainly are a-changing. There are obvious dangers in supping with the establishment, and the fèis movement will inevitably in some way become a victim of its own success. The future will need new ideas, and they will need to keep things fresh, but the fèisean have worked because the ethos is right – it appeals to the people that matter, in this case the children.

It is a big success story and what enthral me most is not so much the astonishing musical performances, the instances of individual excellence, or even the sight of so many children happy to take a couple of tunes out of an instrument with no other agenda than the fun of it all. What really gets me is the irreplaceable light that is so evident in the children’s eyes. They have reclaimed something that is priceless, and no matter what changes lie ahead, some things have now been set in stone. History has been turned around; that light will never leave the children’s eyes and Kenny Gilles of Portnalong will still be the best tune ever written.

Look what has happened to the kids: your kids, my kids, our kids, a generation of Highland kids. They are Na Càidheil Ùra, the New Highlanders; happy to wear the badge of identity, confident to carry their fiddles to a Red Hot Chilli Peppers Concert; quick to take the Gaelic option in school. They have no cultural schizophrenia; they are eager to belong, eager to share. That cultural change is no mean feat, it is a huge achievement.

Meanwhile, a long line of cars make their way up to Ullapool for the last night of the Junior Feis Rois – the final concert. Parents, many with no particular previous association with Highland culture, travel from all over Ross-shire to pick up their children. On the car CD player they are listening to Julie Fowlis and Franz Ferdinand. By the road side are the place names in English and Gaelic and, in front, the big information signs, telling drivers to keep to the left in all the great common languages of Europe, flashing through the rain in lines of glorious neon.

And just as the sceptics predicted so many years ago, the cars have all well and truly gone off the road, caught fire and the fire has raged on ever since – maybe they’ll never be able to put the flames out now. The crash has been quite spectacular. Happy birthday, fèisean.

### Look what has happened to the kids: your kids, my kids, our kids, a generation of Highland kids. They are Na Càidheil Ùra, the New Highlanders...
Strengthening communities

Fionn MacCumhail instructed his harpist to play not the music of things that are said, but the music of things that are done.

Fr McDyer of Glencolmcille, 1982

The féisean are not just about music or Gaelic or young people: they are about strengthening communities. In the years before the féisean began, there were a number of initiatives which were important in preparing the ground.

In Ireland, Father McDyer had influenced rural development in the establishment of a community-owned heritage village and employment projects in Glencolmcille, with ‘féiseanna’ celebrating community life. In 70s Scotland, the arts were a powerful tool for urban regeneration in community-run Craigmillar and Easterhouse Festivals. These initiatives fed a recognition that the arts can help to build stronger communities, combining creativity and community enterprise to address local needs. Here, Roy Pedersen, John Angus MacKay, Mike Russell and John Murphy discuss some factors which led to the féisean.

ROY PEDERSEN:
Formerly with the Highlands & Islands Development Board (HIDB), Comunn na Gàidhlig (CNAG) and Highlands & Islands Enterprise (HIE)

The key factor in the emergence of Fèis Bharraigh was Father Colin MacInnes, who had a sense that Gaelic and music traditions were not being passed on to the younger generation – I believe that’s what motivated him, supported by local people who shared that vision. Very often it’s an individual or small group of individuals who start something off in that way. Certainly the Highlands & Islands Development Board was an important element in all of this. In the early days of the Board the whole social dimension was absent; it saw itself largely as an economic agency. Then came the whole co-operative
and community enterprise movement. I had joined the Board by then and was involved from the start. By 1975 the HIDB had been quite successful in reversing the population decline in the inner Moray Firth area and Inverness, with initiatives like the Invergordon aluminium smelter in 1968 and oil platform fabrication yard at Nigg, and the population had started to grow, but in the Western Isles, North West Sutherland and places like that, the population was still declining. So despite the fact that maximum grants and loans were available in these areas, they weren’t really being taken up to any great extent. No-one could understand why that was, but it was probably due to the fact that there wasn’t a tradition of entrepreneurship. Unlike farming which has long operated as businesses, crofting had more of a subsistence approach to economics.

It was actually Brian Wilson, then editor of the West Highland Free Press, who had been over in Ireland in a journalistic capacity and came across these multi-functional community co-operatives or co-chomuinn. He wrote about these and drew them to the attention of the chairman of the HIDB, Professor Ken Alexander and Iain MacAskill, secretary of the HIDB. They went over to Ireland and had a look, and what impressed them was that these were self-help organisations in areas of considerable rural development needs, including electricity, water supplies and so on. A number of priests, of whom Father McDyer was one, got the communities organised on co-operative lines to actually provide these things themselves. By raising money locally and from emigrants to other countries, sufficient funds to put in the electricity, water and other vital services were found. Having done that, they would then concentrate on other needs. For example, they set up summer Irish language schools for children which were paid for by government. They set up knitwear factories, fish farms, tourist accommodation and all sorts of other businesses. That’s where this multi-functional idea came in. There were quite a number of these initiatives in Ireland. The famous one was in Glencolmcille, County Donegal. There were some in the Aran Islands and there was one at Ballyferriter, on the Dingle peninsula.

It was decided to try to develop similar initiatives in the Highlands, specifically in the Western Isles, promoting locally-owned economic initiatives, developed and run through the medium of Gaelic. So a scheme was developed with generous financial assistance, with two local fieldworkers appointed. This was a great innovation at the time; there were no local HIDB offices then so all business was done from Inverness.

The co-chomuinn were launched after a group came over from Ireland, representing Gaeltarra Eireann, a similar agency to the HIDB in the Irish speaking areas, who had funded the initiatives. Seven or eight people came over in an Air Islander aircraft; they cleared customs at Glasgow and headed off for Barra, where apparently they nearly landed on the wrong beach – it was a hilarious visit by all accounts. They hit it off famously with the Barra people, with much céilidhing into the small hours. Then they worked their way up to Ness in Lewis, describing to different communities how the co-chomuinn worked. So with that visit and the appointment of two field officers, the scheme got underway. It surpassed all expectations, although it was an uphill struggle at first to develop the skills in management and financial control in local communities, and help people to move from grant aid to sustainability. A good many of the co-chomuinn survive after 25-30 years. They inspired other community enterprises all
over the Highlands and Islands; there are well over a hundred of these now, by and large doing very well and fulfilling useful functions. Some of them went to the wall of course, but the success rate of community enterprises is much better than that of conventional small businesses, which can go to the wall with monotonous regularity. There was a Village Hall Scheme operating at the time, to build or extend village halls, and some of these projects became co-chomunn.

There came a point where many HIDB staff, having been pretty sceptical about the idea in the early days, realised that the scheme was proving to be rather successful. So it became an accepted way to do things, and that laid a foundation for other things. One of these was that there was a bit of emphasis on the arts. The Highlands then were considered to be a bit of an arts ‘desert’; many people thought that, including Highlanders themselves. Through the social grant scheme, we started off by supporting touring companies, bringing companies from outside the area to tour in remote areas and to show people what the arts were all about. That evolved gradually into partially helping local groups to tour. Latterly, it was all local groups that were supported.

So Father Colin had been involved with Co-chomunn an lochdair, which also involved building a new village hall, and then he moved to Barra and became involved with the feis, in 1981. The HIDB provided a grant for that, again an innovation, as it was the first example of a Social Grant for an event. One of the rules at the time was that if it was a recurring application, you could only have a grant for up to three years. After that the project had to pay for itself, unless there was a new development. Of course three years came and the feis grew and grew, and there was some new aspect to apply for over a number of years. And then the next feis came along, Feis Rois, and so on it went. The other important thing happening at that time was the concern about the state of Gaelic, Iain MacAskill, the HIDB secretary brought together a group of prominent Gaels, with Bob Storey’s involvement to write a report on the state of Gaelic, Cor na Gàidhlig. Runrig were a big thing at the time, Feis Bharaigh had just happened, and Comunn na Gàidhlig (CNAG) was set up in 1984 as a result of this report. There was then a sense that music was a valuable dimension of the whole thing, partly for Gaelic, partly for its own sake. All of these things were about trying to rebuild confidence at community level, particularly in young people. Gaelic-medium playgroups came in around the same time and the first Gaelic schools were set up in Glasgow and Inverness in 1985. The idea behind that was to create a new generation of young Gaelic speakers, which it has done to some extent. So there was a whole climate in the mid-eighties of the desirability of all these kinds of things, and from the HIDB perspective, as more and more feisean came on stream, they would be supported by the Board on a similar basis to the one in Barra. The National Gaelic Arts Project (NGAP) was set up – it supported the feisean and the creation of the umbrella organisations. Feisean nan Gàidheal, NGAP too got assistance, tied in with the monies to CNAG to begin with. With the establishment of Feisean nan Gàidheal this organisation was able to attract funding from the Scottish Arts Council and local authorities in support of local feisean.

Another dimension of Board support which came about from 1990 to 1991 was the commemoration of twenty-five years of the HIDB through the HI Light Year of the Arts. Thinking back, this was actually incredibly successful, in that it transformed the Highlands from being perceived as an ‘arts desert’ into being seen as ‘arts rich’. In the course of one year, that negative perception was turned on its head, and I think the Highlands and Islands is now widely regarded as an area which is, particularly in traditional music, very rich.

HI Light publicised the arts in the Highlands and Islands, particularly the traditional arts and the feisean would have been part of that. HI-arts as an arts development organisation was created out of that; it’s now a high profile organisation which turns over £2 million each year.

So there was a multi-stranded structure for supporting cultural development, of which the feisean became a significant part. I think the value feisean put on Gaelic is important. One argument against the feisean is that they are largely conducted through the medium of English and are therefore not that relevant in terms of Gaelic development, which in a way is true but in another way is not. There are a few feisean which are conducted through the medium of Gaelic and the rest, I believe, are conducted mainly through English. However, what the feisean do, and do very well, is raise the profile of Gaelic. Perhaps the children don’t learn very much Gaelic if they go to a feis, but they are made aware of it, and of the music and culture. Adults come into the language for a whole variety of reasons, be it through names of hills, place names, whatever – and quite a lot do come in through the medium of music, and if that is an entry point, that’s a good thing. So at the very least, the feisean open people’s minds to Gaelic, in a positive way.

As Gaelic-medium education grows, it probably will be possible to have more Gaelic medium feisean. There is room for all of these approaches to culture and I think the feisean are extremely valuable. I think the feisean make a lot of very positive contributions to Gaelic, even though they may be in the medium of English. You don’t start one day being interested in a language and reach fluency the next; there’s a whole process of motivation, and the feisean are one way of stimulating interest in the language and to quite large numbers of people. Some feisean, Barra for example, are run partially through Gaelic. And in terms of the aim of increasing confidence, you can see how much more confident young people are, and when you see the numbers of really, really good young musicians who have come through the feis, it does your heart good. I think it’s wonderful.

...the Highlands and Islands is now widely regarded as an area which is, particularly in traditional music, very rich.
In the ‘90s the fèisean had continued to spread, and inspired and provided a model which was adopted and adapted for Cèolas, a Gaelic arts summer school based in South Uist.

At the time he was trying to find ways to create a developmental dynamic in that community, and he came up with the idea that there should be a tearoom and hall in Lochdar. Those of us who were involved in the co-chomuinn were involved with him in that project. There were times when I couldn’t quite understand – why a tearoom? But later I began to realise that the tearoom was a metaphor for social action. It was a stimulus, a way of trying to get people involved, and he hit on the idea of having something concrete going up – literally concrete – which would act as a place where people could meet, talk, have some music and local things go on. I understand now what he was searching for at that stage was something which could create a focus for social action.

Having done that, when he moved to Barra, he started talking about setting up a tearoom again – I remember saying ‘Oh no, not another tearoom’… because they didn’t tend to make money; it was always a struggle to get it going and to keep it going. I think Father Colin possibly realised that too, and he continued the search. Looking back, what he achieved through setting up the fèis, was that he again set up something which was in a sense concrete, because there were things actually happening, and there was a structure put in place. This time it was a metaphor for cultural action, which carried within it both a social cohesion dimension and a cultural dimension, whereas the tearoom was heading more towards the economic. I think from his experiences in Barra and in Lochdar, he was able to replicate some of these ways of working in his present work in Ecuador. This he did through ways that were relevant to the circumstances there in Quito, both in relation to getting buildings built that the community needed, and also in creating other means of social action that the community needed, including cultural approaches. That to me is a fascinating story.

So Fèis Bharraigh happened, and the fèisean started developing. Comunn na Gàidhlig was established in 1984, and together with An Comunn Gaidhealach and the Arts Council, set up Pròiseact nan Ealan (PnE), the Gaelic Arts Agency. in 1987. The philosophy behind the action of PnE was that where something wasn’t happening and there was a clear need for an initiative, Pròiseact nan Ealan could help to set that in place and then support it to manage itself. Where things were happening already and needed to be co-ordinated and strengthened, PnE could interact with that situation, help to create an infrastructure and again, give the project support to become independent.

That’s what happened with the development of Fèisean nan Gàidheal; PnE helped to put some structure round things so that they would develop further through networking community action that was already happening.

Basically what had happened for years, in the ‘50s, ‘60s and ‘70s, was if you got on at the Mòd, which was essentially competitive, you might end up with a recording contract or something. But if you didn’t get on at the Mòd, even although you were quite talented, you might just fade into obscurity. So we realised that the fèis, as something that was non-competitive, was a powerful force in developing the Gaelic arts, especially song and music.

This concept of a ladder of
opportunity emerged which was rooted in the community, in this case with the local féisean, but reaching towards the stars. PnE was able to put in place professional training opportunities, for people who were starting out as professional or semi-professional musicians and for those who had already started recording, putting new rungs on the ladder so to speak.

Over the years we’ve seen people coming through that into situations where they’re on stage, they’re on screen; they’re recording and becoming more and more the stars of the Gaelic world. So that thing that started off as an attempt to find a way of creating cultural action and interaction has grown into something that is very strong indeed. In the ‘90s the féisean had continued to spread, and inspired and provided a model which was adopted and adapted for Ceòlas, a Gaelic arts summer school based in South Uist. Ceòlas is in a sense a féis for adults and for those who have achieved particular skill levels; Ceòlas has developed not only a strong Scottish dimension, but an international dimension in connection with Cape Breton, and has been recognised for its success through winning the premier Scottish tourism and culture award. Thus the féisean movement is a prime example of the process of the mainstreaming of Gaelic arts which happened throughout the late eighties and nineties.

I was on the Scottish Arts Council and chaired the Combined Arts Committee for three or four years, until 1993. During that time, it was very encouraging to see a number of things coming through from community grass roots level and strengthening; we could see it happen. We encouraged it to happen, and what was really supportive was other members of the committee from other backgrounds, for example Bridget McConnell (at that time with The Arts in Fife), who saw that there was something worthwhile going on in the Highlands and Islands. Over that period the Combined Arts Committee devoted more of its budget towards traditional arts, not just Gaelic arts; it expanded that part of the budget over the years and then mainstreamed things which had been secondary or marginal prior to that time.

I remember asking at a meeting what did the term ‘Scottish Arts Council’ actually mean? Is it the Arts Council in Scotland, or about Scottish Arts? When people discussed it they said it must be a Council for the Scottish Arts. I hope the new body Creative Scotland follows this through.

The féisean have been recognised as a seminal development at community level, regional level, national level, and are increasingly recognised internationally. Graduates of the féisean are beginning to be recognised as people that have gone through something that’s very worthwhile. It’s not just about learning to play music, it’s also about feeling confident about performing, recording, becoming professional or semi-professional, reaching another rung on the ladder and feeding back into the community.

Fèisean nan Gàidheal, as the organisation which represents the network of local féisean, has been a cornerstone of community arts development over the years – not just at community level and not just in artistic sense. Fèisean nan Gàidheal has also been significant in helping to raise the image of the Gaelic arts, both within the Gaelic community and in the wider Scottish community.

So in my mind, something that started off as a spark of inspiration of a parish priest looking for a stimulus for cultural action, has grown from being a grass roots project to becoming a powerful artistic force which has played a key role in mainstreaming the Gaelic Arts.
MICHAEL RUSSELL: Writer, broadcaster and former MSP

I suppose I was around when the movement began, having worked in Uist and Barra in the late 1970s. I dimly recall Father Colin Machinnes’ inspirational (if at times infuriating) work on all sorts of things – building halls, constructing canoes, getting horticultural schemes started – and one of them was to do with traditional music and song, and passing on the skills.

My real enthusiasm, however, came as a result of taking on, amongst other portfolios, opposition responsibility for Culture and Gaelic in the first Scottish Parliament in 1999. Soon I was getting regular e-mails and letters about various feisean – not just from Arthur Cormack but also from a whole host of other people. I visited some of the organisers, and sometimes even a feis. I was always impressed with the enthusiasm, the sense of fun and the determination to spread the message along with the music.

Most of my time as Gaelic spokesman was spent trying to persuade the Executive to do more than enquire or consult. A secure status bill had been promised and was desperately needed, and that would provide some of the context for growing the language. But such a task would never succeed if the language did not also grow by involving and enthusing young people, many from English-speaking homes. The feis movement was, and is, at the forefront of that and it was getting governmental recognition of that fact which was also important.

That recognition was slow in coming, but it has come; so have limited resources to underpin what is being done locally by volunteers. There is enough money in the system – heaven knows, the Scottish Executive is awash with cash – to ensure a strong administrative base at the centre, proper reward for tutors and enough to develop language teaching over and above what already happens. Proper funding would establish a safety net in which anyone getting involved with any feis can have the opportunity to deepen their language skills.

Like a stone dropped in a pond, the ripples spread out and help to build a future for the language as well as the culture.

What is needed now is to put some of that money behind these initiatives.

Twenty-five years is a long time, though it passes quickly. In 1980 the first Celtic Film Festival – born at about the same time as the feis movement – was held in Iochdar in South Uist, in that very hall built by Fr. Colin. The Film Festival has survived and contributed and grown as minority language TV has grown. But I am pretty sure that the greater contribution to the well-being of Gaelic at grass roots has come not from those working from the top down, but from what people do for themselves and for others in their locality: in other words from initiatives such as feisean. That will go on being proved for the next twenty-five years – hopefully in an era in which official indifference diminishes and we as a nation take a stronger interest in all the cultures of Scotland and the way in which they make the difference between existing and really living.
John’s role in supporting Gaelic arts and in particular the feisean, is reflected in Aonghas MacNeacail’s poem: *an draoidheachd shàmhach: a quiet magician*, written for John’s retirement in 1998.

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*a quiet magician*

dorus a’ fosgladh
toit ag éinidh
faileas clarsair
(cluinn as gach aitreamh
fuaran san teud)
bha o murchu an siud

a door opens
curl of smoke rises
shadow of a harpist
(hearn from every building
cool spring in the harpstring)
murphy’s been here

a door open

curl of smoke rises
shadow of a fiddler
(hear from every building
the strings’ persuasions)
murphy’s been here

a door opens

curl of smoke rises
shadow of a dancer
(see in every building
a fluency of footwork
like the motion of leaves)
murphy’s been here

a door opens

curl of smoke rises
shadow of a piper
(deeds go marching
across the threshold
out where a desert’s now
people with song)
murphy’s among them
unobtrusive, shadow of the sun

Aonghas MacNeacail

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Any consideration of regional arts development in Scotland from the late ’70s onwards has to recognise the contribution of John Murphy, the Scottish Arts Council’s Combined Arts Director for over two decades. John’s role in supporting the funding of locally based and traditional arts cannot be underestimated. With good-humoured persistence, John has championed local arts development, linking arts and cultural development needs with professional artists, administrators and funders. John’s role in supporting Gaelic arts and in particular the feisean, is reflected in Aonghas MacNeacail’s poem: *an draoidheachd shàmhach: a quiet magician*, written for John’s retirement in 1998.
The Council didn’t support folk music or the Gaelic arts in any way at all in those days, for which there were two reasons. When I started to talk about it people would say to me ‘don’t drag us back to the kailyard’ – I think they felt somehow that sophisticated European art was what was deserved in a modern European nation, and they perhaps thought that their own indigenous arts were fairly useless, to be honest. The other attitude that was around at the time was not that folk song, or Gaelic song, or Shetland fiddling wasn’t important, but they would say it’s not one of our priorities – there has to be a cut off point somewhere and with the resources available, traditional arts would always fall below the line.

In the early ’80s I put forward a proposal to the council through the Combined Arts Committee that we should set up a small working group to consider the current state and future needs of the traditional and folk arts of Scotland. That was an excellent working group. On it we had people like Hamish Henderson, Aly Bain, Ishbel MacLean, Margaret Bennett, Eddie MacCuire and Aonghas MacNeacail; it was a powerful group. This group was greatly welcomed at this stage by the School of Scottish Studies, who saw that for the first time the Scottish Arts Council was taking a serious interest in what they had been collecting, recording, supporting and teaching for a long time. The working group report, *The Traditional Arts of Scotland*, was published in 1984 and for the first time a small budget was created to support traditional and folk arts.

There was still a fear in my mind that the Council would think, because they had a general heading of traditional and folk arts, Gaelic would be just swept into it as a sort of museum culture. I was conscious that Gaelic was a unique language with its own cultural and historical development which had to be considered separately. Out of concerns that this might happen, I managed to get a bit of money from my committee to commission Dr Finlay MacLeod to go out and walk the highways and byways of the West Highlands and Islands, talking to the people. It wasn’t formal committees or focus groups; he was chatting to people at croft gates and getting a sense of what they really thought about their own arts and culture, what they were concerned about for the future, whether they were concerned about young people participating in it, things being lost and so on. He wrote a report in 1986 called *Gaelic Arts – A Way Ahead*. Armed with this, I took the then Director of the Arts Council, Tim Mason, on a tour of the Highlands and Islands, calling in to the Highlands and Islands Development Board (HIDB), as it was then, to introduce him to people like Bob Storey, who was Senior Social Development Officer, and Iain MacAskill, HIDB Secretary and later Chair of the Crofters Commission. At that meeting I said ‘we’re thinking of forming a Gaelic arts organisation’ to which Iain replied ‘that sounds like a very good idea.’ All sorts of things were happening at that point in the Gaelic world, and a Gaelic development arts organisation would be invaluable. So I said ‘would you be prepared to help with funding it?’ To which he said ‘yes, how much’ and I said – not having a clue at that stage – ‘£5000 would help to get it off the ground!’ And that was the beginning of PRòiseact nan Ealan.

There followed discussions and consultations with local authorities and all the Gaelic organisations. Through this, I was recognised as being involved in Gaelic arts development and I was also aware of what was happening in the Gaelic speaking community in Scotland. At this point there was only one feis: Fèis Bharraigh. I had no development budget, so Fèis Bharraigh had to apply to the Music Committee for funding. At that time, there was an overall policy that the Council did not support folk festivals, of which Fèis Bharraigh was seen to be one. There was no way they would support the artists or concerts which took place during the feis, but they would...

...so it’s about a culture that has respect for itself and I think it is still the case amongst the young people involved in the fèisean.
give a little towards the tutors – all one and the same thing really. But it was a very small amount of money because they didn’t recognise any of the overhead costs involved in setting the fèis up in the first place.

After some rejigging of responsibilities within the Arts Council, I became responsible for Folk Arts, Gaelic Arts and Regional Development - out of which came Shetland Arts Trust, Dumfries and Galloway Arts Association and so on. Having got that responsibility, I was able to maintain a link with Pròiseact nan Ealan and to support the other fèisean that came along later.

Word travelled about the success of the fèis in Barra and over the next few years we saw the fèisean increase by eight, nine, ten: spreading up through the islands and winging their way across the western mainland. The ‘Queen of the Fèisean’ in the Arts Council in those days was my secretary, Lyn Lockhart. Everybody knew Lyn. She got to know all the fèisean organisers over the telephone; she knew all the details and kept me right about where there were any problems. She was really running the show at the Arts Council end.

At the point of formation of Fèisean nan Gàidheal, it got to the stage where there were too many small events for us to handle, we couldn’t cope with so many sums of money going to an increasing number of fèisean, and the thought I had was that if we could group them together in some way into an umbrella organisation we could then look at the thing on a larger scale, and we could crank up the amount of money that the organisation would get, which could provide useful leverage for support from other agencies such as the HDB, local authorities and sponsors. It was a force to be reckoned with, an umbrella organisation, but how to form it, was the question – how to bring people together from the Gaelic community and from the different fèisean.

So it was Pròiseact nan Ealan, Malcolm MacLean and his team in Stornoway who set up Fèisean nan Gàidheal in the first place, supporting it to become a freestanding organisation. It was an important aspect of Pròiseact nan Ealan that rather than the organisation itself expanding with each new project, that it would develop new initiatives and then cut them loose to develop in their own right.

They did the same with Tosg, the Gaelic Theatre Group; that became an independent company; the same with Ceòlas in South Uist. So Pròiseact nan Ealan was in an ideal position to do that job and create the board, set up the constitution and get the whole thing in place and then cut it loose. And of course they were blessed in appointing Arthur Cormack as the first full-time Development Officer of Fèisean nan Gàidheal. Before Fèisean nan Gàidheal came along, I can remember one of the fèisean sending in their receipts in an envelope, every single receipt of the whole fèis. I would spread it all out on the kitchen table and draw up an income and expenditure statement from the pile of receipts and pass it to Lyn to type up. She would send it back to the fèis to have two people sign it, then pass it on to our finance department. It was perfectly accurate. I think when you’re in a body like the Arts Council you should be in a position where you can really help valuable things to establish themselves, you can’t just sit back and say ‘you’re entirely on your own’ and make judgement. I remember that Lyn felt that a large chunk of her life had been removed when she no longer had phone calls from all these people we’d come to know and like. It was an important part of our work.

Partnership funding varied from fèis to fèis, in some cases there was support from local authorities and some fèisean who would generate funding themselves. Most of them ran ceilidhs and events throughout the year to be able to come up with other income. I don’t think the Arts Council ever gave all they were asked for; no-one ever got what they asked for, funds always had to be eeked out a bit! But I think people had a pretty shrewd idea of what they needed to run each event.

Going back to the beginning of Fèisean nan Gàidheal, I went to one of the early AGMs in Portree. They weren’t expecting me, and they were most concerned that I would take the grant away from them because they’d actually made a reasonable surplus in that year. I remember Arthur turning round to me and saying ‘John, close your ears!’ But I always believed that if an organisation was doing a good job it should have some money in the bank – there’s no point in an organisation trying to develop itself and as soon as they make a success, you take the funding back from them or reduce the grant the following year because then they’re back on the borderline.

For the future of the fèisean, one of the problems was what to do with young people who are about fourteen or fifteen and who begin to bail out because they feel they’re too grown up for it. Fèis Alba aimed to address that problem for talented teenagers. While you wouldn’t expect all the participants to go on to study music, it would be interesting to know how many go from the fèis movement on to study traditional music at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, for example.

I don’t think the fèisean should be expected to be a Gaelic language movement. I think that it’s important to keep aspects of Gaelic culture alive; all fèisean should have an element of the language bit. I wonder how those with knowledge and skills and a depth of understanding of the culture. So it’s about a culture that has respect for itself and I think it is still the case amongst the young people involved in the fèisean. I think that’s something that other parts of Scotland may have lost. Maybe it’s a rural thing; it probably exists in Shetland and perhaps in other parts of rural Scotland. But it certainly exists in the Gàidhealtachd and the fèisean are about passing that on.

The fèisean came at a very critical moment, it was important that it happened when it did. One of the tremendous strengths of the fèisean is the quality of the tutors. I always felt that the professionalism of the artist is crucial. The extraordinary level of support from the tradition bearers and their recognition of the importance of the fèisean is a great strength. I felt that there was a respect in the Gaelic community for the older generation, for people who have knowledge and skills and a depth of understanding of the culture. So it’s about a culture that has respect for itself and I think it is still the case amongst the young people involved in the fèisean. I think that’s something that other parts of Scotland may have lost. Maybe it’s a rural thing; it probably exists in Shetland and perhaps in other parts of rural Scotland. But it certainly exists in the Gàidhealtachd and the fèisean are about passing that on.
There are times when certain circumstances and people come together to create something altogether amazing. Such was the genesis of Fèis Bharraigh.

Kenna Campbell, 2005

In July 1981 the people of Barra successfully pioneered a festival, Fèis Bharraigh, which was a combination of community festival and traditional music school...for a fortnight of the school holidays, some 200 island children attended daily classes in piping, clarsach, whistle, fiddle, accordion, singing and dancing. The emphasis in tuition was heavily on the oral Gaelic tradition. The pupils were encouraged to display their new skills at evening concerts, supported by local artistes, and at informal cèilidhs and visits to places like old folks’ homes, where there was a high degree of communal involvement.

Cor na Gàidhlig, 1982
MAIGHSTIR CAILEAN MACAONGHAI:
A Stèidhich Fèis Bharraigh

Bha sinn a’ smaointinn air féis a chur a’chur air aghaidh anns na h-eaglais agus air a’ t-ìomadach ceànlidh a bhiodh againn ann an seo. Tha cuimhn’ agam mar a mhìnich mi rithe air rud air an robh mi a’ smaointinn agus thuirt i “Bhiodh sin fhèin lovely.”

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2. fèis

The first fèisean na bha annta, feadh an ùine bheag a bh’ againn!

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...the féis opened Barra to the world, and the world to Barra
When I returned home after ten years, I found no music or events, nothing. Uist or Moidart had no piping, hardly anything and they’d always been so musical. That shocked me. I started to look for funding for a summer school, and got to know Father Colin MacInnes. He went to the Scottish Arts Council for funding, and told them he’d like it to be a fèis, and that’s how it started. 

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dheireadh thall chuir Aly Bain mi gu Daibhidh Tulloch (nach maireann), Ùidhelear a Sealtainn. Thàinig balach òg air Glaschu airson am bocsa a theagasg agus, leis a-sin, bha an sgioba crùinn comhla.

Fhuair sinn iasad de dh’innealaich ciùil an-siud ’s an-seo agus cuideachadh bhò dheachainn de na buidhean a bha a’ dhanamh phròban aig an am sin. Bha an turas eadar Glaschu agus an t-aiseag a’ staochas leis na bha a bheòchan agus air mullach a’ chàir.

Nuair a raingeinn Sàbgh a’ Chaisteil lha muntaidh Bharraigh air obair chomasach da’-rithb a dhianamh. Dh’thàg sin a’ chìd fhèis air leth sobhreachail agus bhrosnaich e sgèran eile chun a’ cheart rud fhèuchainn iad fhèin.

DR ANGUS MACDONALD: (English summary)
Dr Angus MacDonald, a renowned piper from Glenuig, worked in Cape Breton for a time before returning to Scotland. With Father Colin, he co-founded Feis Bharraigh.

I was so disappointed when I went home to Moidart and Uist after many years at university and working in Glasgow to find that traditional music was in a poor state. Something needed to be done for the younger generation to improve this situation. With ideas formed by the experience of piping summer schools in America and with the health of traditional music in Cape Breton and the success of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann in Ireland, I decided that it would be a great idea to bring musicians to one place where the conditions were right for tuition and get local youngsters involved in music. My first thoughts were to do this in Uist and I met Fr Colin, then in Lochdair, South Uist who was very interested in the project. He was on the point of leaving Uist for Barra and so the focus changed towards Barra. But Father Colin wanted first to make sure the Barra people were happy with the idea. They were, and the project was launched.

Because what we proposed was a teaching festival, the Scottish Arts Council could not provide us with funds. However Fr Colin convinced them that with ceilidhs and other events during the feis we were eligible for support.

Funding was difficult to find, so also were the musicians. Kenna Campbell and Isbhel T MacDonald became involved very early on, so also did the late Duncan Johnstone. The clarsach player Patsy Seddon came on board, but getting a fiddler and a box player proved more difficult. Eventually, the late Davie Tulloch agreed to come to teach fiddle and a young box player from Glasgow was enlisted. The team was complete.

We borrowed instruments here and there. My car journey from Glasgow to the Barra ferry at Oban was more than hampered by the number of instruments stacked in and on top of the vehicle.

When we reached Castlebay it was evident that the Barra people had prepared really well. That meant that the first feis was very successful and this encouraged other areas to establish their own feisean.

KENNA CAMPBELL:
Gaelic singer

In this extract from the prologue to the 2005 Feis Study, carried out by the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (RSAMD), Kenna Campbell, celebrated Gaelic singer and tradition bearer recalls tutoring at the first Feis Bharraigh.

‘As an interested outsider – I had never set foot in Barra – I was paid the supreme compliment of being invited to be one of the tutors at this first feis. I recall our excitement and anticipation as along with my colleague Isbhel T. MacDonald, daughter of Roddy Roidhein and an avid collector of songs, we devised a curriculum and identified suitable songs for the children. We dug deep in our own memory banks but realised that our initial approach should be through local material, an approach that, interestingly, remains a cornerstone of feis practice. Much had been recorded in Barra by various collectors, not least by the School of Scottish Studies who were generous to us with help. Our main source of songs for that first feis was the highly respected collector and academic, Reverend William Matheson, then recently retired.

The sight and sound of the children singing lives with me to this day, and whenever I hear ‘Crodh an Tàilleir’ or ‘Fosgail an Dorus dha’n Tàilleir Fhidhleir’ or Duncan Johnstone’s ‘Farewell to Nigg’, I can feel the warmth of the sun that shone on us then and hear the children’s voices, intermingled with the strains of the pipes, the fiddle and the clàrsach, ringing in my ears.

Kenna Campbell, RSAMD, 2005
from the Celtic department of Edinburgh University, who was intrigued and delighted to be involved in this novel venture.

It had been claimed by some that children were no longer interested in the old Gaelic songs, games and riddles. We were curious to find out whether this was true of the children who would — we hoped — be attending Feis Bharraigh. The enthusiasm, enjoyment, beauty, and incredible energy with which they took to the songs told us otherwise.

SIMON MACKENZIE: Actor
Simon MacKenzie taught drama at Feis Bharraigh and spent a year as an SAC drama worker in residence on Barra. In the MNet/CMS television programme, Thar Chuan is Chaolas, Simon said of the feis teenagers in the early eighties:

‘They’re about 15 or 16, and more interested in pop and so on. If only they had something — anything — about the old Gaelic songs, presented differently.’

In 2005, Simon commented:
‘It’s hard to believe that what started twenty-five years ago would spread throughout the Highlands… the important aspect is that young, talented Gaels, especially those who sing and play musical instruments, have gained enough confidence to make a living from it. We have to remember how supportive the Barra women were; those women were supporters of the children’s rights. They saw that the children’s formal education excluded Gaelic language and culture, and that’s where the movement started. The school closed on the Friday for the summer holidays but the children were happy to turn up there again on the Monday morning for the feis.

I remember particularly how much fun we had, how hard we worked. The feis was novel, it was the talk of the town, and the whole island was entranced by it. It was a source of wonder not just to Barra people but all over the Highlands. We’d be out at Ceilidhs and dances every night. If we weren’t in Northbay we’d be in Castletbay or if not there, on Vatersay. That was before there was a causeway, and we would be brought to Vatersay in all kind of boats. We were crazy!’

CEANNA CHAIMBEUL: Ban-shineadair Chàidhlig
Chan fhàighinn seachad air cho toilichte ’s a bha a’ chlann a’ tighinn a-staigh. Smaoinich – a’ chaid chola-deug dhe na làithean saora ac a gus bha iad a’ tighinn a-staigh agus bha iad mar uiseagan. Cha mhòr nach robh iad gaid leigile air do dhrum deal an t-seirinn ac a. O, bha iad math; bha iad eibhinn; bha iad cho grinn. A sealltainn air ais, chan eil cùimhne agam ach air an t-sàide bhréagha – na làithean grianach – agus tha mi cantainn num fìn! Na fhìos go bheil sin ceàrn, chrob e grianaich a h-uile latha! Ach bha – bha a’ ghrian ann fad na sàide agus bha sinn a-muigh air na cnuic ag obair leis a’ chloinn. Bha e dreach sònraichte. Bha a h-uile duine aig Feis Bharraigh cho laghach ’s cho gasda.

Bha a’ bhlaiddhna a bh’ ann uabhasach dona le gòbheaglan – bha iad anns a h-uile àite. Nan toireadh tu do shìul far do chupa ’b bhiodh tè a snàmh tarsainn!

Kenna Campbell’s daughters, Wilma and Mary Ann Kennedy, were both involved as tutors from an early age. Here, Wilma describes her experience:

WILMA KENNEDY: Gaelic singer and tutor
I was at the second Feis Bharraigh. I can just remember it was sunny and there seemed to be kids everywhere, playing instruments or singing. You would find a row of kids lying against the wall outside the school, playing the chanter for example. It was so warm that people were taking the classes outside and everywhere there was just a buzz of people laughing and learning; it was infectious. There was a feeling of excitement about learning and the kids were just lapping it up like sponges, soaking in all the knowledge, fun and energy of music, Gaelic, nonsense and hilarity. They were absorbing it all through every pore, and the whole feeling was one of wanting to be there — I remember my eyes were wide open! It was the most fabulous experience to go through when you’re just a relatively young person; it had quite a profound effect on me. That would have been 1982 when I was thirteen;

that’s quite an important age when you are influenced by a lot of things.

I had no concept of what a feis was, other than what my Mum had told me from the previous year, and it was mind blowing to be in among so many people who spoke Gaelic. Having been brought up in Glasgow, my sister and I and the family around us spoke Gaelic, but there weren’t kids around us who spoke Gaelic. Going to a feis where it was normal to speak Gaelic — that was wonderful as a young person to see the relevance of the language and to meet other young people from the whole island was entranced by it. It was a source of wonder not just to Barra people but all over the Highlands. We’d be out at ceilidhs and dances every night. If we weren’t in Northbay we’d be in Castletbay or if not there, on Vatersay. That was before there was a causeway, and we would be brought to Vatersay in all kind of boats. We were crazy!’
people of the same age as me speaking the same language. It was a revelation: there was a community, a culture, a reason for speaking the language, for singing and for having fun. You could see the relevance of your language. It was vital that other people of my age spoke Gaelic too, and that the language was in its natural context in the community.

There just seemed to be things going on constantly; there were so many classes and people and tutors like Cathy Ann, Simon, Blair, Ishbel T., my Mum, Kenna Campbell and sister, Mary Ann. I still remember the jokes that Cathy Ann told; she’s a fantastic storyteller and she was pulling our legs something rotten. I was there helping with the drama class, working with Simon MacKenzie in his green velour tracksuit which was famous – I think he had a banana yellow one too. I went to the second and third Fèis Bharraigh, helping with classes, and in the evening there were cèilidhs and dances. I remember the most amazing night we went to Vatersay – this was before the causeway was built. There was a cèilidh in Vatersay Hall, and we’d missed the ferry that was going over so we got a lift from either the doctor or the vet, in his dinghy. This dinghy took about nine of us, on a clear calm night, with a couple of pipers on board – I’m sure one of them was Anna Murray. One of them played the pipes, just to take our minds off how low we were sitting in the water. It was a big dinghy I have to say, with an outboard engine. The buzz and the excitement of it made you realise ‘this isn’t Glasgow!’ This is a memory you’re going to keep for ever. Going across the water with the castle behind you, leaving the lights of Castlebay; it was cold, and the spray coming up around the boat and the pipes playing and coming into Vatersay, thinking ‘now that’s a taxi to get to a cèilidh!’ It was just fantastic, and so was the reception we got coming into Vatersay. Coming home, of course it was late and we had missed the ferry again, so we got a lift back on a fishing boat at about three or four in the morning, and we were doing a Canadian Barn Dance on the deck. As a kid, it was so amazing. You just accepted that wonderful, magical things like that happened every night; it was normal – it was a fèis.

CATHY ANN MACPHEE:
*Gaelic singer and tutor*

‘When I began tutoring at Fèis Bharraigh, it had been going about 8–9 years. I was proud to be given the opportunity; it was great that people wanted to be taught by me. It was really my first opportunity to teach young people. I was nervous at first and then I thought nothing could be better than this, it’s not really work. You were giving back to people what you’d received from your own home.’

MnE/GMS, 2005

SÌNEAG BLANE:
*Parent*

‘My very first memory connected with Fèis Bharraigh was waiting in the car at Northbay church for mum. She was busy talking to Father Colin. On her return I asked what she’d been talking about, and she told me that Father Colin was thinking of holding a fèis, which she explained was a festival of music and dance. I was greatly impressed, and visions of outdoor parties, Mexican fiestas and afternoon siestas flooded my mind. I did wonder how this might be possible with the Barra climate, but I didn’t think the concerns of an eight year old would hold much weight!’

Fèis Bharraigh Programme, 2005

Going across the water with the castle behind you, leaving the lights of Castlebay; it was cold, and the spray coming up around the boat and the pipes playing and coming into Vatersay, thinking ‘now that’s a taxi to get to a cèilidh!’
MONA DOUGLAS:
Former fèis co-ordinator

‘Without the community, Fèis Bharraigh could never have become a reality, or have been such a success. The extent of community involvement in the fèis can best be understood when one realises that there were few people in Barra, young or old, who did not participate actively in one way or another in the fèis. Of special note was the enthusiasm shown by the community, the readiness of individuals to become members of the Festival Society, the willingness of so many to provide delicacies and light refreshments, to supervise and organise the many events held during the fortnight and to contribute to the general festival air which captivates the whole island for the duration of the fèis. The essence of Fèis Bharraigh is to revive and develop the rich cultural legacy which has been left to us as an inheritance from past generations, and thoroughly enjoy ourselves while doing so.’

The Bridge, 1991

MARY JANET MACDONALD:
Cape Breton, Step dance tutor at Fèis Bharraigh

The first time I came to Scotland was to Fèis Bharraigh in 1983. Father Colin contacted Father Eugene Morris in Cape Breton, who was also a step dancer and teaching at the time, but he was unable to go to Barra. Father Colin felt that step dancing had its roots in Scotland, and wanted to bring that back to the children. The fèis concept was totally new to me, and it was my first experience of being in a place where various disciplines connected with the Gaelic language were taught together. It was a real eye-opener for me and I saw it as something that we should be doing at home. In Cape Breton we had been concentrating on doing everything separately, and the language itself wasn’t really taught. There were separate lessons for things in separate communities, and everything seemed a bit disjointed.

What I saw in Scotland was concentrating on the whole picture and how intertwined the traditions are.

About 1990/91 we had our first fèis for children in our area, and we learned a lot from what was happening in Scotland. I felt like I was coming home when I first visited Scotland; I saw so many similarities in the people from Cape Breton and Scotland. I felt that the fèis itself was extremely well organised, and there was a good connection between all the disciplines being taught.

The people in Cape Breton had never considered that their step dancing was anything but Scottish. Hebridean dancing was also taught at Fèis Bharraigh, and the tutor for that would come and visit my classes, and told me of the memories it brought back to him of his grandmother doing similar footwork. It seemed to be the Catholic community in Cape Breton that was most into the music and dancing, even though some members of the community condemned it.

Going to Fèis Bharraigh for the first time was one of the highlights of my life as a dancer. I think that Fèis Bharraigh has helped to re-establish step dancing in Scotland. A lot of the credit also goes to Harvey Beaton, who worked with adults. I am very impressed by the level of step dancing in Scotland now, with people taking advanced classes to the level where I’m running out of steps to teach them! Step dancing is not competitive; it should be a social thing for parties or cèilidhs. Personally, I don’t like being on stage because I feel that dancing is meant to be spontaneous. If dancers from Scotland went to join in with dancing in Cape Breton people would never guess where they were from, as the standard there is just as high.
I always like the last class of
the day at Fèis Bharraigh when
classes cross over; mingling
the disciplines is a great thing
but I think it should be more
spontaneous rather than
working towards a performance.
I work with a group of teenagers
and some of them learn songs
for the dancers, and this came
directly from the fèisean. Before
I came to Fèis Bharraigh, I had
never danced to pipers, and
I really enjoy it. I had never
danced to puirt either, but
my grandmother’s sister did
something similar called ‘jigging
the tunes’, where they would
make the sound of the fiddle
with their mouth. Dancing to
puirt is now encouraged in Cape
Breton.

IAIN IÒSAPH MACNÈILL:
A bha na chathraiche aig
Fèis Bharraigh

Thòisich mi a’ dol dhan Fhèis
nuair a bha mi sia agus an uair
sin thòisich mi a’ deanaich
beagan de theagasg. Bha mi
a’ cuideachadh aig dràma aon
bhiadhna agus feumaidh gun
d’ fhuair feadhainn a-mach mu
dheidhinn oir bha mi a’ teagasc
drama ‘s bord-ciùil air feadh an
àite an deòid sin.

An uair sin, nu chòig
bliadhna air ais, thòisich mi
air a’ chomataidh – dreach
a’ deanaich beagan de
chuideachadh dhaibh. Bha mi
nam neach-chlar trì bliadhna
air ais – bha mi a’ deanaich
sin airson trì bliadhna agus air
sàileabh m’ obair agus rudan
ùra a’ tachairt nam bheatha, b’
fhéudar dhomh an fhèis thàgail
an-uireadh agus cha robh mi mun
chuairt airson an celebration mòr.

Tha feum mhòr, mhòr air féis
agus chan ann dreach airson
cèol ‘s Gàidhlig ‘s cultar ‘s dràma.
Tha tòrr mòr de rudan eile e a
bhios tu ag ionnsachadh
nuair a bhios tu a’ coinneachadh
ri tòrr dhaoine, mar sgilean
sòisealta. Bhiodh tu a-staigh
còmhla ris na daoine a tha seo
agus a’ Ghàidhlig ‘s an ceol
cho math aca; chan eil mise a’
smaointinn gum biodh sinn far
a bheil sin le cèol ‘s le Gàidhlig
às aonais nam féisean. Gu
dearbha tha chan eil airson air
oidhirp cho mòr sin a
dhèanamh, gu sònraiche ann
an ceol tràidiseanta agus ann
an Gàidhlig. Nuair a bha mise
san gaoth airson leithid de
rud ann cil a tha thu a’ faighinn
beagan sheachdaineann ann an
cèol Albannach, a’ bruidhinn
mu dheidhinn bothy ballads agus
òrain-luaidh – sin na bha thu a’
faighinn.

Bha cuid againn gu math
fortanach – bha ar seanairce
’s ar seanmhaireann againn. Bha
mise gu math fortanach gun
d’ fhuair mi a’ chular sin cuideachadh
’s gun rohbor mi fein a’ faicinn
Mar a bha na seann daoine
ag obair Aich, airson duine
sam bith nach robh, tha mi
’smaoinneachadh gun d’ rinn an
fhèis feum agus gun tug i buaidh
mhòr air daoine. Chanainnsa
gu bheil tòrr mòr obair ri
dhèanamh. Mar a tha thios aig
a f-ùile duine tha daonnan
rudeigin ann is urrainn dhut a
dhèanamh.

Chanainnsa gu bheil an t’ am a’
tighinn far am bi na féisean a’ fàs
cho mòr ‘s gum feum na féisean
neach-taice dhaibh fein a bhith
ann. Bu chòir do chuideigin a
bhith air gach eilean is gach
àite a bhiadh ag obair airson
comapaidh coltach ri Fèisean
nan Gàidheal, a bhiadh a
stùireadh cèol agus Gàidhlig
agus rudan mar bhàrdadh’s
sgeulachdán. Chaninn mur a
faighinn rudeigin a chumas
seo a’ dol gun caill sinn na
sgeulachdán ‘s a’ bhàrdadh
– rudan nach eil eil na féisean an
sàs ann fhathast. Tha na h-orra
laith ann mar Barraigh ach tha
eagal orm gu bheil rudan mar
bhàrdadh’s sgeulachdán a’ dol
a dh’haibh.

Chan eil leithid de rud, an
goireas a tha sin, ann idir agus
’s e an t-eagal a th’ omrsa gu
bheil na seann daoine a tha sin
’a dol a bhasadhachd agus gum
bi na sgeulachdann a th’ aca air
chall. ’S e sin dreach aon rud a
chanainnsa a dh’ thaodadh na
féisean coimhead air.

JOHN JOE MACNEIL:
Former Chair of Fèis Bharraigh

(English summary)

I started going to Fèis Bharraigh
when I was six, and much later I
was involved as a tutor teaching
drama. Five years ago, I joined the
committee, and was chair from
the age of 19. There is a real need for the feis – it’s not just music, drama and Gaelic that you learn at the feis, but also ‘social skills’ too, which comes from meeting and working with a range of people. I have learned a lot through the feis, for example from tutors who have good Gaelic, and know a lot about Gaelic culture. I don’t think we’d be where we are today without the feis; the schools haven’t done as much as the feisan.

For those who weren’t fortunate enough to see their grandfathers, schools haven’t done as much as the feis, for example from tutors who have good Gaelic, and know a lot about Gaelic culture. I don’t think we’d be where we are today without the feis.

MÀIRI NIC PHÀDRAIG AGUS CEITEAG NIC NÈILL: Buill comataidh na Fèise

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At the first feis nobody knew what was ahead. Nothing like this had ever happened in the islands. We didn’t think the kids would have an interest in the music and dance. Some were doubtful about it, but there was a group that were full of enthusiasm. There were some people who said it would never work – 25 years later they were proved wrong! Without the feis I don’t know where the music would be today.

We always worked for the feis as volunteers although if someone was paid all year round to fill out the forms that would make such a difference. We do have twenty paid hours, which helps, but after each feis there is a tremendous amount of work involved, in organising the classes for example. It is difficult to always rely on someone to do the work as a volunteer.

Red tape has come in to play and the committee work has changed. In the first feis, there were tatties and herring and all sorts of food to be had, now we have to get health and hygiene certificates for everything. You have to employ someone with a certificate to do the food, which costs more money, and funding is always a challenge. I think people are busier these days; they don’t seem to have as much time. We need more parents to take an interest in the feis; there are four of us still involved twenty-five years down the line! We could support new people and help them with what has to be done. It was good when the young ones took an interest in the feis and the committee.

Feisean nan Gàidheal are supporting us to keep classes going through the year, and Lews Castle College have arranged classes with their students working as tutors. These workshops are helpful for us and also give the college students teaching experience. Over one or two weeks, the feis does have a knock-on effect on the economy of the island, in that it brings people in. The tourist season is rather short in Barra, but we’ve noticed that there is something happening every week all summer now. People look to see what’s going on during the summer and the feis is

Màiri Paterson & Katie MacNeil:
Feis Bharraigh Committee
(English summary)

At the first feis nobody knew what was ahead. Nothing like this had ever happened in the islands. We didn’t think the kids would have an interest in the music and dance. Some were doubtful about it, but there was a group that were full of enthusiasm. There were some people who said it would never work – 25 years later they were proved wrong! Without the feis I don’t know where the music would be today.

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SANDRA NIC DHONNCHAIDH:

Dannsair agus neach-teagaig

’S ann à Barraigh a tha mi ged a bha mi mòran bhiadihnaichean air à-triùr ann an Grangemouth. Thòisich mi ag Feis Bharraigh mu 1984’s cha robh Gàidhlig agam an uair sin. Dh’iarr iad orm danusa Gàidhealach a dhèanamh. Bha Anne NicNeill à Barraigh na tidsear aca, ach bha tòrr anns a’ chlas agus chaidh mise ann airson trì bliadhna a’ teagasg.

Bha ùidh agam an traidhneachd Gàidhealach a dhèanamh aig coig bliadhna a dh’aois agus chaidh mi tro na deuchainnean air fad gu réir teagaig, Cha do rinn mi mòran teagasg aig an air aghaidh ’s gun robh mi nam oileanach. As dèidh siud cha robh mi a’ teagasg mòran teagasg danusa ach aig na fèisean a bha a’ tachairt tro na làithean-saora.

As dèidh bliadhna no dha thòisich Feis Bharraigh air danusa Hebridean a dhèanamh cuideachd. Bha Fearchar MacNeill ga dhèanamh an sin anns na 1930s. Bha cuimhne aig feadhannin dh’iubhail an t-àm sin Barraigh gu robh sin a’ tachairt. Bha daoine mar Chitidh Anna NicFhionghain a smaoineachadh gum biodh e na dhèagaidh a bhith a’ togal air stiùghail sin a-rithist agus thòisich iad gá theagasg aig an fhèis. Bha ùidh aig na dannsairdean uile ann an danusa Hebridean agus thàinig feadhannin eile a’ trì-mòr airson an dannsa ionnseachadh cuideachd.

DHONCHAIDH:

SANDRA NIC

fèis wasn’t around. It would certainly be a loss if the music would be certainly an attraction to people. It would certainly be a loss if the fèis wasn’t around.

Without the fèis I went on to do evening classes in Stirling and courses at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. Now my Gaelic is very much better than it ever was.

SANDRA ROBERTSON:

Dancer and dance tutor

(English summary)

I have Barra connections but was brought up in Grangemouth and as a result I had little Gaelic. When I was young I was interested in Highland Dancing and progressed to the stage where I had qualifications to teach it. In 1984 I was first asked to teach dancing at Feis Bharraigh. That year Kenna Campbell was also tutoring at the fèis and with her encouragement, I attended the Gaelic classes she was running there. From that beginning with Kenna I went on to do evening classes in Highland Dancing.

After a year or two the fèis started Hebridean Dancing based on the work of Farquhar MacNeil in the 1930s. This proved very popular. At about this time some on the committee heard that Frances MacEachan from Cape Breton was in South Uist to learn Gaelic and they asked her to come over to do a little step dancing tuition during meal times — the timetable was so full that it could not be fitted in elsewhere. I remember the first time I saw step dancing; Frances was dancing in Northbay Hall in Grangemouth.
Barra. Later Harvey Beaton from Cape Breton came over to Sabhal Mor Ostaig in Skye to teach dancing classes. I attended them and later went over to Cape Breton to perfect my skills. I now teach this sort of dancing, but I am also still learning.

Feis Bharraigh has featured in several television programmes including Thar Chuan is Chaolas (MnE/GMS, 2005) which celebrates the 25th Feis Bharraigh and the 15th year of Feis Eilean na Nollaige, in Cape Breton. A 1998 programme Bho Thangusdail gu T onga (Metagama/GMS) documented a visit made by Feis Bharraigh participants to the Polynesian island of T onga, organised through the Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council.

In July 2005, Feis Bharraigh celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary with a traditional feast for those who were involved in the first event. Guests included Father Colin MacInnes who came over from Ecuador for the occasion. Also Cathy Anne MacPhee who was invited home from Canada to tutor in Gaelic song and to perform at the final night of the Ceòl nam Feis concert. In this extract from Northings, the online journal produced by HI-Arts, Fiona MacKenzie reports on the final concert:

There cannot be many more romantic venues for an anniversary concert than a grand marquee on the machair at Tangasdale on the isle of Barra...this was the venue for the 25th Anniversary concert of Feis Bharraigh, the original feis which precipitated the whole feisean movement. The work of the feisean movement was represented by young singers and musicians from all over Scotland...and was indeed a testament to the excellent work being carried out...in the encouragement of the young people’s musical and cultural educational development...we can only hope that the next 25 years will be just as culturally productive, if not more so.

SÌNEAG BLANE:
Parent
‘Last year my children attended Feis Bharraigh for the first time and as we entered Castlebay School, I was overwhelmed with the feeling that nothing had changed. The location, atmosphere and friends were all the same. The only difference was we were now the parents. It is hard to believe that the feis is celebrating twenty-five years. And it is due to the dedication of countless people that it is possible for me to bring my children to the feis to enjoy the unique experience that helps mould and shape the people they will become.’

Feis Bharraigh Programme, 2005

CLAIRE MACNEIL:
Dance tutor
‘When I was little I came to the feis mostly for Highland dancing. Last year I taught it.’

A feis must be a celebration, must lead people to enthuse and be excited about the various cultural expressions—song, dance, drama etc—and within an aura of joy and happiness. It should never be a systematic disciplined programme of activities which have to be completed within a determined time. I do consider that the Gaelic culture and language must be the basic inspiration of the event. The language should pervade the event, be given maximum expression and practice and should be introduced to those who have less proficiency in the language, not as something that is imposed but rather as a progressively unravelled mystery to be discovered and enjoyed.

Father Colin MacInnes, letter to the West Highland Free Press
Fèis Rois
Ross & Cromarty 1986

The fèis was this tremendously exciting new thing, and from the very beginning the children seemed to get so much out of it...
Rita Hunter, Manager, Fèis Rois

Fèis Rois, the largest of the family of fèisean, organises three separate events each year: for children, teenagers and adults, involving over 500 participants. Based in the Ross and Cromarty area of the Highlands, this fèis organises year-round classes and workshops, traditional music education in schools across Scotland and cultural tourism projects. The developmental work of this fèis owes much to sustained administrative and financial support by the local authority, Highland Council, together with the commitment of manager Rita Hunter, who has realised the full potential of the organisation at local and national levels.

Fèis Rois was founded by Christine Martin, an instrumental music teacher based in Tain, and Kate Martin, a Community Education worker based in Wester Ross, who took the idea to Ross & Cromarty District Council. Jock Watt, Director of Leisure Services, and Neil McKechnie, Chair of the Council’s Gaelic Committee, gave strong support to the initiative. Jean Urquhart of The Cèilidh Place in Ullapool was also involved from the beginning, bringing business expertise as well as experience in running arts events. After the first three years, administration of the fèis passed to the Council’s new arts officer, Bryan Beattie, with Rita Hunter appointed as a full-time manager in 1991.

Fèis Rois is the only fèis which employs full-time staff. In 2006 it has seven staff: a manager, an administration assistant, a business and tourism officer, cèilidh trail co-ordinator, project co-ordinator, education officer and education development officer. Fèis Rois has three main events each year: Fèis Òigridh runs over a week at Easter for Primary 5-7 children, Fèis Rois nan Deugairean for teenagers takes place during a week of the October holidays, and an adult fèis, Fèis Rois Inbhich, also known as ‘the best weekend of the year!’ takes place during the May bank holiday weekend. All three fèisean are now based in Ullapool, Wester Ross, at The Cèilidh Place, but over the years have been held in various venues in Dingwall and Gairloch.

Fèis Rois was this tremendously exciting new thing, and from the very beginning the children seemed to get so much out of it...
Rita Hunter, Manager, Fèis Rois

2. fèis the first fèisean
It is difficult to summarise the expansion of Feis Rois over a period of twenty-one years. The website, www.feisean.org/rois can offer a full account of this hugely successful feis. In 1999, a business development manager was appointed to develop commercial sponsorship, fundraising and cultural tourism. A successful lottery bid for just over £60,000 enabled the appointment of an education officer to develop work in schools. A newsletter produced by the feis reported fifty students participating in two concerts at the 2006 Celtic Connections Festival, the production of a CD to celebrate 20 years in 2005, and two Music in Schools schemes delivered by the feis, reaching thousands of children across Scotland. Rather than try to capture the many achievements of Feis Rois over two decades, it is more practical in this history of the feis movement to discuss some of the factors which have contributed to its growth and outstanding achievements.

Contributions are given here from founder members Christine, Kate and Jock with Bryan and Rita taking up the story of how they further developed the initiative, and participants and tutors adding their views.

CHRISTINE MARTIN:
Strings teacher and founder member, Feis Rois

I was always interested in traditional music at school and university; but in schools in the 1970s or 80s, you weren’t supposed to teach traditional music. I actually got into trouble once for teaching traditional music – I didn’t see why we shouldn’t be teaching traditional styles. If we couldn’t do it in school, then that’s why we needed to have a feis.

For me, Feis Rois came about as a result of a visit to Feis Bharraigh. We had friends in South Uist and one summer when we went to visit them, they were going to Barra for the feis, so we all went together with some other friends – Anne Hughes and Neil Morrison who were tutors at Feis Bharraigh that year. It seemed to involve mostly Barra children and some who came back from Glasgow and other places for the summer.

The following year, 1985, we went back again and knew various other people who were tutors and it just looked like such good fun. Our children were a bit too young, so I came back and thought, ‘why couldn’t we do something like that in Easter Ross?’ I loved traditional music and there wasn’t a lot of it around for young people and it wasn’t part of my remit as a strings teacher in Easter Ross. So I talked about it to Kate Martin, a friend who worked in Community Education in Wester Ross, who was keen on Gaelic and had Gaelic development as part of her job. I also knew Neil McKechnie through the Ross-shire Music Festival and the local Mòd, and thought he might be interested because of his support for Gaelic as a Councillor with the District Council, and as Chair of the Education Committee of Highland Regional Council. I knew Jock Watt, Director of Leisure Services in Ross and Cromarty District Council, who was very keen on traditional music and very supportive of local initiatives. In the autumn of 1985, we all had a meeting in my kitchen in Tain to discuss what we could set up, something like the Barra feis, but something especially for Ross-shire children who didn’t really have much Gaelic – they would mainly be learners. Both Neil and Jock were behind the idea right from the start.

We talked about possible funding and who would be the right people to get it off the ground. They suggested Kate and I do it and the District Council would provide secretarial help through Leisure Services. Kate thought it would be a good idea to base it at The Cèilidh Place in Ullapool because she knew that Jean Urquhart, who runs The Cèilidh Place, was doing innovative things like running arts courses and promoting traditional music for visitors. The Cèilidh Place Clubhouse offered good basic accommodation, ideal for children, and we thought it would be a good idea for that to be our first venue for Ross-shire. Jean was really keen to be involved and offered us the use of the Clubhouse and the whole hotel for the last week of the summer term.

The first fèis we had was actually run during term time, in June 1986 with pupils from Primary 5 to 6th year. I had to get permission for any children from Ross-shire who wanted to attend because it was difficult for...
children to be off school. Where tutors were teachers in schools, we had to write to Councils for permission for them to tutor at the fèis.

This first fèis had about fifty children and quite a few of them were my pupils in Tain. We had a good group of fiddlers and a few harp players as well because I was able to talk to pupils and persuade them to come. We advertised it as well; it was a new thing, so it wasn’t all that easy. For our first fèis, Kate and I did a huge amount of work. It was a very rewarding and very exhausting week. Not only did we look after the running of the classes and making sure the programme went according to plan during the day, that all the children were in the right classes and the tutors were happy; but we also did all the minding at night and did all the evening craft activities ourselves.

I did some teaching as well, and as tutors, we did all the entertaining and played for the dances and ceilidhs through the week. We did all the art and craft work too, using Celtic designs for screen printing, badge making and stained glass painting.

One of the ideas Kate had was to introduce the Gaelic element, because most of the children didn’t have Gaelic and weren’t taught any Gaelic at school. But Kate felt that Gaelic tuition should be a strong part of the fèis, through drama and games. We brought in a tutor, Alasdair MacKinnon, to do Gaelic tuition. He brought all kinds of games, and had computer games (which was really advanced at that time), and had lots of different ideas for learning Gaelic. We did try to involve everybody who took part in learning some Gaelic. It was a very important part of the fèis; everyone took part in Gaelic classes first thing in the day.

We had the ceilidh at the end of the week; there weren’t so many children then so we had it in the village hall. In the first year, finding places for the classes was difficult as the school was still in session. We had classes all over the village. Accordion was upstairs in the Fisherman’s Mission; drums were in the Sports Pavilion in a hut which was the changing rooms for the tennis courts. The whistle class was in Robert Urquhart’s office, he was away at the time, and I don’t think Jean ever told him. There were some classes in the Clubhouse as well, pipes, chanter and fiddle in The Ceilidh Place dining room, and clarsach tuition was in the upstairs lounge of the hotel. Most of the children stayed in the Clubhouse; I think we had about thirty-six residential children and then local children, making up about fifty. All the tutors were in The Ceilidh Place hotel, except Kate and me, as we were supervising the children in the Clubhouse. The older pupils were very helpful too. Being a small fèis there was a good family atmosphere.

The second year the fèis was held at Easter, which was better for using the school, but wasn’t so easy for tutors, especially for teachers, who needed to have holidays. The second fèis had about thirty-six residential children and then local children, making up about fifty. All the tutors were in The Ceilidh Place hotel, except Kate and me, as we were supervising the children in the Clubhouse. The older pupils were very helpful too. Being a small fèis there was a good family atmosphere.

The second year the fèis was held at Easter, which was better for using the school, but wasn’t so easy for tutors, especially for teachers, who needed to have holidays. The second fèis had about eighty young people so immediately it was a success. From the very first it was clear that the children loved the idea of the fèis – they kept coming back and more new people came to take part.

KATE MARTIN:
Founder member, Feis Rois

I can track my involvement in the fèisean in T-shirts. Small sizes from 1986 and 1987 when, in the first two years of Feis Rois, we bought children’s T-shirts and helped the children to screen print Celtic designs. I have a larger T-shirt for 1988, when more adults became involved as helpers and tutors as the fèis grew. Feis Rois began with around fifty children, most of whom are in the photograph of us lounging on the grassy bank outside The Ceilidh Place in Ullapool. It was June and T-shirt weather. Some classes were held outside and there was a buzz about the village. People usually enjoy hearing children play music and locals and visitors alike would ask what was going on. Later, a parent came up to me in the street and said, ‘when are you doing that Fez again?’
Both Christine and I were qualified teachers and had experience in running workshops for children and young people. We were conscious of focusing on the tuition element of the feis rather than a wider-community event as in Barra – although the community ownership aspect was built in from the start. It was important that we had residential events as the communities in Ross-shire are so widely scattered and children from isolated rural villages rarely had a chance to meet. We talked the idea over for several months and worked out a proposal; then we approached Ross & Cromarty District Council who supported the plan from the outset.

The first year, Christine and I organised and ran the event and looked after the children in the Clubhouse. I remember giving the children a safety talk about going to the shop near the Clubhouse. I remember giving them props. For example, giving them a giant inflatable banana and asking them to devise a story around it. The class would ask for Gaelic words and phrases to be able to tell their story and by the end of the week, could perform short plays in Gaelic. Maeve later became a Gaelic teacher and has gone on to become an acclaimed singer.

Jean Urquhart helped enormously in setting the right atmosphere. Jean’s arts experience was useful, but what really made the difference was that for the staff in The Cèilidh Place, nothing was a problem. We were conscious of focusing on the tuition element of the feis rather than a wider-community event as in Barra – although the community ownership aspect was built in from the start. It was important that we had residential events as the communities in Ross-shire are so widely scattered and children from isolated rural villages rarely had a chance to meet. We talked the idea over for several months and worked out a proposal; then we approached Ross & Cromarty District Council who supported the plan from the outset.

The first year, Christine and I organised and ran the event and looked after the children in the Clubhouse. I remember giving the children a safety talk about going to the shop near the Clubhouse by asking them first to form a small group, then to ask for permission to go.

The next morning I woke about 6.30am with children at the door saying, ‘We’ve got a group, can we go to the shop now?’ We realised that organisers couldn’t do everything, so the second year we asked two Cèilidh Place employees, Maeve MacKinnon and Babz MacGregor, to be helpers and they were fantastic. As young Gaels they were full of enthusiasm for the language and the fun. Babz took the drama class and helped children who had no Gaelic to learn basic vocabulary by giving them props. For example, giving them a giant inflatable banana and asking them to devise a story around it. The class would ask for Gaelic words and phrases to be able to tell their story and by the end of the week, could perform short plays in Gaelic. Maeve later became a Gaelic teacher and has gone on to become an acclaimed singer.

Jean Urquhart helped enormously in setting the right atmosphere. Jean’s arts experience was useful, but what really made the difference was that for the staff in The Cèilidh Place, nothing was a problem. When you’ve taken over an entire hotel with a lively group of children and adults, it was important that the staff were helpful, enjoyed the fun, and at the same time provided high standards of comfortable accommodation. Some of the children were away from home for the first time and needed lots of support. One year we had a boy whose parental consent form said ‘will only eat ‘Haunted House’ spaghetti’. We all laughed; but it was true!

In 1987 eighty children came to the second feis. By then, Ross & Cromarty were keen to employ a Gaelic Arts Officer, and began the process of advertising this post. That year, I was also invited to take a group of young people from Feis Rois to the Veneto region of Italy to participate in concerts as part of a European festival. The group performed to audiences of up to 3000 in main squares of towns around Venice, with some of the biggest eightsome reels in the world! Feis participants included Corrina Hewat, Louise MacKenzie and Margaret Burgess, along with a group from Ross-shire folk. I asked Community Education colleague and Gaelic singer Anne Martin to join the group with two young musicians from Skye. One of these ‘young people’ turned out to be Blair Douglas, who acted as musical director for the tour. It was the first time I had met Blair and we were friends after that. The beautiful tune, ‘Kate Martin’s Waltz’ came about indirectly as a result of Feis Rois going to Venice.

Feis Rois grew steadily from fifty, then eighty, to a hundred and twenty children in 1988, when Bryan Beattie took up post as arts officer with Ross and Cromarty District Council. After working together that year, I passed the organiser’s role to Bryan. By 1989, numbers soared to over two hundred – partly because word had spread and partly because every child in Ross-shire had seemingly been given a keyboard for Christmas. Also Bryan had brought artists-in-residence to Ross-shire who could offer new classes. For example Caroline Reagh, now with Dannsa, introduced a contemporary dance class which explored Celtic legends.

I have a crisp, clean tee-shirt from 1990, the first year I visited, rather than worked on, the feis. That was the year I began a secondment as Community Arts Co-ordinator from 1989, numbers soared to over two hundred – partly because word had spread and partly because every child in Ross-shire had seemingly been given a keyboard for Christmas. Also Bryan had brought artists-in-residence to Ross-shire who could offer new classes. For example Caroline Reagh, now with Dannsa, introduced a contemporary dance class which explored Celtic legends.

My final T-shirt, purchased at the tenth Feis Rois, is much more sophisticated and trendy – a baggy T-shirt with a cool...
The fèis is important to me because my grandad speaks Gaelic and my dad plays the accordion.

I like learning Gaelic and learning how to play more instruments.

Gemma, aged 10

such an extensive programme in relation to the other fèisean. One reason was that the Council’s newly established Gaelic Committee were keen to support new initiatives. Also Ross and Cromarty District Council, led by Chief Executive Douglas Sinclair was forward-thinking in their support of the arts. A further driving force was Jock Watt, Director of Leisure Services, who supported the idea before the words ‘let’s have a fèis’ were out of Christine’s mouth!

Other factors were important to Fèis Rois: the needs of Gaelic, work with young people, community involvement and collaborative working. In the eighties, the state of Gaelic in Ross-shire was in serious decline. In Western Ross, where I was employed in the eighties by Highland Regional Council as a Community Education worker, 34% of the population still spoke Gaelic, most over forty years in age. A work colleague told me that as a five year old starting school, he had been belted for speaking the only language he knew. The Gaelic language, song and music that had been the mainstay of the culture in that area had almost disappeared, only evident at weddings and ceilidhs. Many people were keen to retain and rebuild this, particularly in order to strengthen the remote and fragile communities of the west coast. Some would say ‘let Gaelic die, and give it a decent wake’, but at heart, most seemingly still enjoyed the song, the pipes, the fiddle, the dance, the ceòlidh. Gaelic formed the heritage of families and communities: it was bound up with work, people and place, kinship ties and relationships. It isn’t easy to detach culture from people or from place.

In the early eighties there was an important change for young people and their communities in Wester Ross. The two secondary schools in Gairloch and Ullapool were upgraded to sixth year. This meant that young people, instead of leaving at twelve to go to school in Dingwall, could stay in the area until sixth year. Previously, taking all the creative, imaginative, energetic young people out of the area had left it without potential for regrowth. In the early eighties, with a new generation of young people staying in the west, there were opportunities to participate in cultural regeneration for the first time in many years. Part of my remit as a community worker was to promote the Gaelic language and culture through youth work, adult education and community development. In thinking about what might work for young people in the area, at a time when there were no Gaelic medium playgroups or schools, I discussed ideas with other colleagues. Kay Matheson, famous for her part in retrieving the Stone of Destiny from Westminster Abbey in 1950, was the peripatetic Gaelic teacher in the area. Kay told me about An Comunn’s Gaelic camps involving games, sports and arts and crafts organised for children during school holidays at Duncraig Castle College. Cailean Maclean, then Community Education worker in Skye, talked about an initiative he’d been involved with in Uist when working with Father Colin MacInnes where young people were given the chance to learn music and Gaelic. Anne Martin, a trainee community worker, had tried something similar for teenagers in Skye at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. Cailean set up a project in Skye called An Ireach Shamhradh. The project involved Gaelic learners, children and adults staying with local families of Gaelic speakers and taking part in a summer programme of activities through the medium of Gaelic.

All these ideas fed into Fèis Rois, particularly the idea of Gaelic camps. Since then, Sradagan, the Gaelic youth clubs organisation, has taken up the idea of Gaelic camps and have run many successful events.

In my view, community development principles of participation and ownership underpin the movement. In the eighties we wanted more jobs in the Highlands to encourage people who belonged there to stay, or return after being away for further or higher education. Fèis Rois has achieved that by now employing seven young people who have returned to the Highlands, bringing back the energy and enthusiasm the area so badly needs. I believe that the community enterprise framework helped Fèis Rois to grow from the outset. As a community worker I was involved in setting up a local community enterprise in Poolewe and was a director of the Association of Community Enterprises in the Highlands and Islands. Based on those experiences I was able to contribute a knowledge of community enterprise to both Fèis Rois and Feisean nan Gàidheal. Both organisations now run offices, employ staff, are able to apply for project funding and develop new initiatives. Not every fèis might want to become a community company, but it is interesting to explore some ways in which Fèis Rois is different to local fèisean. This organisational structure may be an important factor. Fèis Spé are currently looking into this format.

Collaboration is another factor which I think is particularly important, where working in partnership becomes more than the sum of two halves. In many fèisean, someone experienced in community development has worked along with a professional musician so that skills in working with people and organising projects have been linked with music and teaching abilities to create a new synergy. Partnership between local authority departments in staffing was particularly important in Fèis Rois with education, community education and leisure staff working together. Partnership funding was essential, with initial finance from different sources of socio-economic development and arts development providing the catalyst for the steady growth of the fèisean.

Going back to my T-shirt collection, you know what they say – ‘seen it, done it, first fèisean’

2. feis the first feisean
...I was also invited to take a group of young people from Fèis Rois to the Venetto region of Italy to participate in concerts as part of a European festival.
from visits to other fèisean over the years I’ve collected a good range of colours: pink from Fèis Eilean an Fhraoich, yellow from Fèis Lochabair, green from Fèis nan Garbh-Chrìochan, purple from Fèis Tìr a’ Mhurain, blue from Fèis Bharraigh, a smart white one from the Gordon Gaitherin’. The most recent is a fantastic shade of sunshine orange from Fèis an Earraich, 2006. These are emblems of people’s hard work and of the best of times. Most importantly, they represent over the years, opportunities for young people to grow into accomplished traditional musicians and socially confident Gaels. Something has changed. A host of young tradition-bearers is now carrying forward a culture which is alive with dance, music and song. I feel privileged to have been involved with the fèisean movement and

Katie, aged 9

the Easter Ross competitive music festival that had been running for two to three years. There was a competition between two excellent young fiddlers, one from a local school and one from further away, and while one fellow was playing, the other said, ‘I hope he goes wrong in that tune’. And I thought to myself, ‘is this what music is all about?’ So when Kate and Christine came along with the idea for the fèis, that seemed more about co-operation in music. Neil McKechnie, who chaired the Council’s Gaelic Committee, Christine, Kate and I had a meeting around the table in Christine’s kitchen in Tain. It all started from there. We mustn’t forget the help that came from Ross & Cromarty finance-wise; it couldn’t have managed without it. They had the vision to support the fèis through the Gaelic Committee, chaired by Neil McKechnie and through Leisure Services Committee. As the years progressed, it’s been great to see the fèis develop, and see the young people working together – group music is one of the big things now. It’s getting even more Gaelic now. In the Fèis Rois office I can’t go in but I’ve got the Gaelic word for the

Tha mise a’ déanamh fidheall agus tha e math. Tha mise toilichte

Jock has been a key figure in the success of Fèis Rois, bringing to the initial idea not only support from his department in terms of funding and administrative services, but an enthusiasm for the project which convinced Councillors and other District Council departments of the benefits which the fèis could bring to Ross & Cromarty. Jock was always involved in traditional music in some way, as Fear an T aighe at concerts, as a comedian and singer – and a Silver Medallist at the Dingwall Mòd. Now retired from the Council, Jock still plays an active role in the progress of Fèis Rois as a Director. Together with Neil McKechnie, who chaired the Fèis Rois for twenty years, Jock has been a driving force behind the development of one of the most dynamic youth cultural organisations in Scotland.

What helped me with the fèis and gave me some ideas for Ross-shire was that, through Leisure Services, we had revived the Easter Ross competitive music festival that had been running for two to three years. There was a competition between two excellent young fiddlers, one from a local school and one from further away, and while one fellow was playing, the other said, ‘I hope he goes wrong in that tune’. And I thought to myself, ‘is this what music is all about?’ So when Kate and Christine came along with the idea for the fèis, that seemed more about co-operation in music. Neil McKechnie, who chaired the Council’s Gaelic Committee, Christine, Kate and I had a meeting around the table in Christine’s kitchen in Tain. It all started from there. We mustn’t forget the help that came from Ross & Cromarty finance-wise; it couldn’t have managed without it. They had the vision to support the fèis through the Gaelic Committee, chaired by Neil McKechnie and through Leisure Services Committee. As the years progressed, it’s been great to see the fèis develop, and see the young people working together – group music is one of the big things now. It’s getting even more Gaelic now. In the Fèis Rois office I can’t go in but I’ve got the Gaelic word for the

the first fèisean

2. fèis the first fèisean
The Chief Executive, Douglas Sinclair, was tremendous support. He came up to the first Fèis Rois with quite a number of the Council members. Hamish Fraser, Chairman of Leisure, did an opening speech in the Clubhouse and we marched along to the village hall to the tune of the pipes! There were all ages, secondary and primary, and we were very fortunate, it was superb weather; there was a real festival atmosphere. John D. Burgess and Norman Gillies were the piping instructors and they were working outside with the children, which attracted people along to see what was happening. It was towards the end of the school term in June; later we moved to holiday time which was easier because we had the school. There was a tradition in Ross-shire of using schools which was very positive. There was a good relationship between the District Council and Education in Ross & Cromarty, through support from Alan Forsyth who was the Divisional Education Officer at the time.

In 1988 we employed an Arts Officer in the Council, Bryan Beattie, and he took on responsibility for the feis as part of his job. Rita Hunter has been the feis co-ordinator, now manager, since the early days. To begin with she was a temporary employee on a job creation scheme. Then it came to a stage where you couldn't do without her, and so it remains to this day. Christine O'Hare in the department did the first design for brochures and soon Bill McCallum was involved as a sports officer. The sports officer played an important role, making sure there were evening activities that the children would enjoy. It's all those different bits, making sure that everyone involved was recognised.

I'm still a director of the feis and I drop into the office regularly – it's a very happy family atmosphere and long may it continue like that. I'm full of admiration for the staff team, as the pressure of work is tremendous at times. There are so many different aspects to the feis now. It's all very well having a feis and then you come back next year, but the classes in between make the difference. The classes have expanded beyond all recognition really. The group music making is a great thing, there's band after band starting up. It's become a good matrimonial agency as well apparently!

At my time in school you sang Hark, hark, the lark and that was music. Nowadays, maybe not in schools but certainly outside in the feis movement the culture has a high profile and rightly so. Fèis Rois is now working in schools throughout the length and breadth of Scotland and Chris Rasdale does a fine job administering all this. There are good relationships with local schools and international links starting up, regular visits with Ireland for example. It's very much a pattern of Ross life now; a lot of young people are multi-instrumentalists now. I wouldn't suggest many changes, perhaps more drama, to promote the Gaelic language connection. Drama would also help with stage presentation too. They're confident about being in front of an audience but might have a bit to learn about how to work an audience.

The impact that the feis has had on the area is tremendous. I once said at a concert that it's the best thing that's happened in the Highlands since Culloden. The feis movement has reversed that, it's certainly revived the local culture. You can see it when you go about, how confident the kids are with their own culture. There are jobs for young people in music now – Laura Green is working here with Fèis Rois and Donald William Stewart and Lindsay Dunbar are running a new drama project. From the first Feis, Louise Mackenzie and Corrina Hewat are both involved in the music business. Who would have thought it, from such small beginnings!

I remember there was chap at the first feis who would have needed to have his bonnet surgically removed. I think he's in the photograph – and no, I don't mean Blair Douglas! Blair tutored at the second Fèis Rois, so did Simon Mackenzie, and Cathy Anne MacPhee. Jim...
2. Feis

What next?  
A Feis for seventy year olds, like me!  
That’s not a bad idea!

Hunter was a popular tutor, he had a great way with the kids, and Terry Small, he would really get them going in group work, full of enthusiasm. That was the way it managed to get ahead – there was enthusiasm behind it.

We had great support from Jean Urquhart at The Cèilidh Place for accommodation and a base for the whole thing. We won over the locals. I remember to begin with there were less local people involved from Gairloch, but that’s changed. They come from all over now. From other parts of the Highlands and further afield, there’s various groups come in and join us for the teenage and adult Feis. Its reputation goes ahead of it. The adult Feis is very popular, Its reputation goes ahead of it.

MICHAEL BRYAN:  
Guitar Tutor

I have been coming to Feis Rois since the age of eight. I grew up in Ullapool where there were no guitar teachers in the village so going to the junior and then the senior Feis was my only week of guitar tuition in a year. I have a lot to thank Feis Rois for, as I now tutor at several Feis and love it!

BRYAN BEATTIE:  
Arts Consultant and Chair  
Feis Rois (former Arts Development Officer, Ross & Cromarty, and Expert Advisor to the Minister for Culture, Sports and Tourism, Scottish Executive)

I was lucky enough to inherit one thing when I became Arts Development Officer for Ross and Cromarty in 1988. Feis Rois already had two outings before I was given charge of its organisation. I’d like to think that many of the projects I initiated during my time as Arts Officer lasted the test of time – the truth is it’s the Feis that is the ongoing success story and I can claim no credit for that other than being one of many who helped carry the baton for a few years in its formative stages.

From 1994-99, from being an administrator, I became a funder as Councillor and Chair of Culture and Leisure Services with Highland Council during the handover of the old District Council to the new Regional authority. When Highland Council were taking on the Feis and all the other cultural bodies, I was very much involved at that stage with the overall strategy and support for things like the Feis and Gaelic language. I was also Chair of Eden Court from about 1995-2002; my role there was more as fear an Taighde for some of the concerts we had. I think as well that the director we appointed had sympathy for what the Feis and were doing and a willingness to have them use the theatre, and that has continued. The theatre is a receiving house rather than a producing house and it was really Feis nan Gàidheal, and Feis Rois who have approached Eden Court with specific projects.

Having spent about fifteen years in the Highlands trying to get local government more involved in the arts, the one thing which seemed to galvanise people was the bid for Inverness to become European Capital of Culture in 2008. The Feis movement was definitely seen as a core part of that. When people began to determine ‘what is Highland culture?’ across six different categories, for example, the arts, the environment, language and heritage, the Feis movement was invariably within the top three initiatives that people would cite.

This is quite a significant mind shift – that in a comparatively short period of time the Feis movement became to many people one of the main embodiments of Highland culture. In the late nineties the most senior politician in Highland Council, Peter Peacock, now Minister for Education in Scotland, was wondering how the Feis might be able to deliver traditional music in schools. And of course this has come into being in the past couple of years with the Youth Music Initiative.

In the job I had after that, two years at the Scottish Executive as advisor to the Minister, it was very reassuring to know that the Feis movement was held in high regard at the most senior political level in Scotland. Both Frank McAveety and the First Minister were both well aware of the Feis movement and frequently cited it, not just when commenting on the state of Highland culture, but also the state of culture in Scotland and its health. So to get to that kind of position so early in a parliament, in a new nation, where again it was identified as an important part of Scotland’s culture, I think is an incredibly significant fact.

I think the Feis movement is without doubt the most successful community arts movement in Scotland. In terms of involving grassroots folk in a genuine way and engaging participants in a genuine way, I cannot think of an arts project to match it. Another useful point, I suppose, is that the previous Minister for Culture visited Feis Rois, stayed overnight and actually took part in some of the sessions – even leading one of the ceilidhs with his own self-penned song – and took Jim Hunter’s guitar class. That kind of approach, where a Minister can see what is going on at first hand, is very useful. One of the first things Peter Peacock did on becoming Minister for Education was to ask his civil servants how traditional music could be given the same parity of esteem as all other forms of music. That is directly as a result of his experience of the Feis movement in the Highlands. The Feis movement, I have no doubt will have an impact; I have no doubt that in a few years traditional music will be part of the curriculum, there will be grade examinations and all the rest of it, and it will be given parity of esteem in the education system.

So all these strands which have their root at some stage in the Feis movement are pretty pervasive. I’m now working with RSAMD for a year as a strategic
advisor, and their traditional music course has been running now for about ten years. They’re getting more demand than they can cope with. I took the new principal along to a couple of the fèis events at Celtic Connections, and he was really impressed. He’s been a very enthusiastic advocate, and often quotes the fèis movement as what we should be aspiring towards musically. When folk come into contact with the fèisean, they’re usually pretty impressed. I think the fèisean have become successful in their local communities because they’ve had support from the local movers and shakers. In Ross-shire there were two or three folk who were willing to open the purse strings as well, and take the thing onto a new financial level. At a political level, Neil McKechnie and George Finlayson who was Convener at that time, were making the case to their fellow politicians: the chief executive, Douglas Sinclair and Jock Watt. Without those four battling away against their various political or managerial colleagues, it wouldn’t have happened. Even with all the Martin sisters in the world and all their enthusiasm, ability and all the rest of it, it may well have ended up as a much smaller, different enterprise if it hadn’t been for that additional funding. It was all about belief – when I came in after a couple of years of that, I rode the coat tails of other people’s belief. It’s been the only thing that I found in the Highlands, when I’ve tried to convince people of the worth of the arts – politicians and colleagues – they were already convinced about the fèisean. I’ve just been appointed as Chair of Fèis Rois in January 2006, and plans are to consolidate what we do to ensure that the core events and classes are secure. Fèis Rois now has about 25-30 full-time equivalent jobs in the area, which makes it quite a significant employer.

Celtic Connections has been roaring away throughout Glasgow at an unbelievable rate of knots and our Traditional Music students and graduates have played a big part in its success. I myself attended one of the best orchestral concerts I have ever attended at the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall last Sunday afternoon – Donald Shaw’s ‘Harvest’ promoted by Fèis Rois. Not one ‘classical’ musician in sight. However, the string playing was stunning. Full of passion. Free bowing throughout. Nothing like it has been experienced since the days of Leopold Stokowski.

Professor John Wallace, Principal, RSAMD Weekly News, Jan 2006
I am also the only adult participant who has been at every adult Fèis Rois since it began, which is possibly a sign of inability to be able to learn an instrument properly...for me the adult Fèis has been a great social thing – it’s just good crack, which is not a bad thing in life sometimes.

What I find most satisfying – professionally and personally – is the way the Fèis movement now has the respect and recognition of so many people in Scotland, including the ear of government. For me it is the best example of and justification for grass-roots cultural development and support there is in this country. The Fèisean are a model for the rest of Scotland, and further afield – a gift from the Highlands. In a few years my children will be of an age to attend the Fèis – I envy them.

RITA HUNTER:
Manager, Fèis Rois

The Fèis was this tremendously exciting new thing, and from the very beginning the children seemed to get so much out of it – there was Gaelic language, all the instruments, drama, and all the friends. From the very beginning it had a very special meaning to everyone – it grew incredibly quickly; it really did grow like wildfire round Ross-shire. I suppose there were a few key families in Ross-shire who got involved from the early days, and they would encourage their circles of friends and cousins to come, so it really grew from a warm, friendly core, which meant that it was built on good foundations. There was networking too, between teachers, and between people working in different roles in local authorities which gave a harmonious framework to the Fèis. Everyone seemed to regard the Fèis as something shared and positive and people would do anything to help or to overcome any problems with instruments, helping the children to learn, or making sure everything worked well.

There was always a good support for traditional music in Ross and Cromarty; piping was always strong in Ross-shire, and traditional musicians such as Phil Cunningham, Duncan MacGillivray, Dagger Gordon and Iain MacBeath are based here. The Highland Traditional Music Festival in Dingwall strengthened this support and provided a basis for the development of Fèis Rois. I’ve been with Fèis Rois since 1988, when Kate asked me to come and help. Later I became Bryan’s assistant and became the manager in 1991.

Some of the obstacles we encountered in the early days presented opportunities too; for example, in the fourth year of Fèis Rois, 208 children took part. This was too many for a small village like Ullapool, and all our resources were stretched. By then, Jim Gaitens had become the second Arts Officer in Ross and Cromarty and he keenly supported the idea of giving secondary pupils their own event, so Fèis Rois nan Deugairean was created. It too went on to become a very popular success in its own right, and for the first ten years was held in Gairloch.

In the first couple of years, there were limited follow-on classes; the Kiltearn Fèis Rois fiddlers in Evanton were the first follow-
on class, followed with some piping classes in Ullapool. The importance of follow-on classes was very clear; this was the way to allow people to really develop as singers and musicians. We’ve had a fairly extensive programme of up to sixteen community weekly classes for a good ten years now.

In terms of funding, we were very fortunate from the outset in having tremendous support from Ross and Cromarty District Council. Neil McKechnie, the Chair of Leisure Services, Jock Watt, Director of Leisure Services, Bryan Beattie and Jim Gaitens, as new, dynamic Arts Officers, all shared the vision of the fèis. We also had a very dedicated committee from day one, with parents, teachers and tutors who all saw the fantastic potential of the fèis. If we came up with ideas for development, such as the teenagers’ fèis, or creating an instrument bank, we were very fortunate in having strong support from the Council. Many of them would visit the fèis, so they saw the terrific benefits and rewards of the fèis.

After Fèis nan Deugairean, the next development came from the parents. As they were leaving the young people’s cèilidh at the end of the week, they would say things like ‘don’t you wish we had this when we were young?’ So we thought we would try an adult fèis, and this was started in 1990. At first it was difficult to encourage adults to come because of work or home commitments. We really had to persuade them and almost drag them away from their kitchen sinks; in fact we nearly had to call the first one off due to limited numbers. However it did run, in Tulloch Castle in Dingwall to begin with. Some people would drop in on their way to the shops, or might come to a class after church, and that first core have come regularly since. Every year another circle would come, building an organic and strong wooden foundation of family and friends.

In 2004, three hundred and twenty people took part, some travelling especially for the fèis from America, France, England, Wales, and others coming from all over Scotland. More than half of the adult fèis participants are from the Highlands, with strong groups from Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen. The adult fèis has such a great atmosphere and is a unique event.

When Fèis nan Deugairean was first set up, Kate Martin was keen to set this one up in Gairloch to help to strengthen local Gaelic culture. We had ten very happy years based in the Gairloch Sands Hotel until 2000, when unfortunately the hotel burnt down, so we moved to Ullapool. The adult fèis began in Dingwall then moved to Gairloch and all three fèisean are now based in Ullapool.

It’s the perfect venue – the secondary school, the Macphail Centre, the Village Hall, the Primary School and Lochbroom Leisure – all these buildings are in such good order and all within walking distance. We have sixty-four accommodation bases throughout the village; we organise subsidised accommodation for participants in the junior and senior fèisean, and give out an accommodation list to participants for the adult fèis. The Cèilidh Place, which has always been base camp for us, is just perfect.

I’ve been involved as an organiser with Fèis Rois for eighteen years now. Ross and Cromarty District Council had this terrific vision of the benefits of the arts. After they created two arts officer posts, they appointed a dancer-in-residence, a writer-in-residence and they created the first traditional musician-in-residence post in Scotland. The idea was that this person would take over the development of the two fèisean, and it made sense for this to be a full-time job. So I’ve been full-time since 1990, although I was working with the arts team since 1989.

Because we cover the whole of Ross-shire, which is coast to coast, it’s a different set up to some of the other fèisean. It involves a different, much wider community which involves linking different parts of Ross & Cromarty and making links between villages and communities in East and West Ross. So although Fèis Rois covers a wider area than some fèisean, it still concerns a community and a culture within that wider community in the Highlands.

We used to have informal cèilidhs in the summer in our host venues in Ullapool and Gairloch, which were tremendously successful. Local people and tourists alike loved these cèilidhs, so we made an application to LEADER funding, and one summer we did forty-four cèilidhs with local performers. This gave me the idea of a Cèilidh Trail, where young musicians and singers who were at an advanced level would benefit from playing together so that they could develop as performers and entertain visitors to the area. The name Cèilidh Trail came from Bryan Beattie’s visit to Cape Breton, although it has a different meaning over there. This year, 2005, was the seventh Fèis Rois Cèilidh Trail, and now the idea is rolling out and developing in other areas.

Over the years we’ve included several programme developments suggested by parents who were able to go round and talk to people and see what was needed. From 1990, we started one-to-one master classes with tutors Alison...
Kinnaird, Iain Fraser and more recently, Gordon Gunn. With renowned piping instructors P/M Norman Gillies and the late P/M John D. Burgess, we started a Piping School. All offer one-to-one tuition; I couldn’t overstate how high a value we place on these.

Every Feis Rois participant attends a Gaelic class every day, at five levels: beginner, last year’s Feis, intermediate and fluent. We see a flowering through all the different routes. For example in this year’s Ceilidh Trail group, one has come through Gaelic Medium education, two have sat Higher Gaelic, one has graduated with an Honours degree in Gaelic, one is studying Gaelic at Glasgow University, one is studying Gaelic song at the RSAMD and one is embarking on the Gaelic immersion course at Inverness College.

The Traditional Music in Schools (TMIS) programme is a Scottish Arts Council initiative developed and delivered by Feis Rois, available to thousands of children in social inclusion areas throughout Scotland. Our tutors are working with children many of whom have not had the chance to experience live music or Scottish culture. While there are thousands of children and young people across the Highlands and Islands who have come through the Feis movement, it is extremely rewarding to now be starting to reach children who’ve never had that opportunity and through TMIS and more recently the very important new Youth Music Initiative tuition programme, we are able to contribute to opening up the opportunity to every child in Scotland.

We could never have dreamed what was going to happen or that it was going to grow like this. Every now and then it seems overwhelming, and then you think – it’s still just the beginning.

VAL BRYAN:
Music teacher
Ullapool High School

Val returned from the USA just as Feis Rois was being set up; Val and Tom Bryan were the focus of the well-known song Indiana written by songwriter Andy Mitchell on their return to Scotland. Val was one of the first tutors at Feis Rois and over the years has been a pillar of strength to the organisation. One of the few full-time music teachers who plays an active role in the Feis movement, Val has also compiled two Ceòl nan Feis books for Feisean nan Gàidheal, and with Andy Thorburn has led many tutor training workshops for the membership organisation.

I started teaching in Ullapool High School in 1985, and shortly after that received a letter from Jock Watt who was then head of Leisure Services for Ross & Cromarty District Council, inviting me to become involved in the new Feis Rois proposed for June 1986. As this was the last week of the school term it wasn’t possible for me to be involved, but I remember Norman Gillies, the piping instructor for Wester Ross schools, did teach at the Feis and spoke very highly of it. Ailsa Campbell (piper) and Glen MacRae (drummer) were among pupils who took part.

In February 1987, Kate phoned to ask if I would teach whistle at the Feis, which was to take place during the school holidays. Although I’ve always played the whistle and my main musical training is in flute playing, at that time I’d never taught the whistle so it was a steep learning curve! I remember the first problem being trying to source music and finding Christine Martin’s Ceòl na Frìdhle books very helpful. I think I began with tunes I’d known from my childhood, for example Mo Chùbhrachan, and the Fairy Lullaby.

I loved teaching at the Feis! It was so much more informal than school teaching at that time and influenced my style incredibly. I remember hearing people say – and saying myself – ‘it’s not like school, it’s a Feis’.

Through Feis Rois I have met some wonderful people who have been a huge influence on my life and my teaching, including Jim Hunter, Dougie Pincock, Blair Douglas, Terry
I had a chance to work with musicians I’d known before in previous lives; Alison Kinnaird, Wendy Stewart and Niall Morrison. Working with such fantastic people boosted my confidence in playing and teaching traditional and other music. I became involved with other feisean along the way, teaching for several years at Feis Chataibh in Golspie, Feis Bharraigh, the first Feis Mhuile, and enjoyed the differences between them all. Feis Chataibh in the early 1990s was very much a family affair, with parents involved in the organisation and day-to-day running of the feis. There was great flexibility there too, and the opportunity to put your own ideas into practice. Gaelic was usually integrated into the whole group first session in the morning with around seventy participants, aged 9 to 17. I was involved in many of the first planning meetings for Feisean nan Gàidheal and there were some zany experimental tutor training sessions. We were always keen to get tutors teaching their skill to ‘a beginner’. Norman Gillies told me later he was glad he didn’t go, as Roddy Campbell’s comment after Arthur Donald’s drama session was: ‘I didn’t know I would have to be a blooming teapot!’

Around this time, several feisean started having a pre-feis workshop usually the evening before the feis began. I led some of these at Feis Mhuile and Feis Bharraigh. When Feisean nan Gàidheal started training weekends Andy Thorburn and I were asked to lead, and that seemed to work well. I’ve also led a Tutoring Day for the past three years at Feis Alba. This has worked very well, an hour-long introductory session, with feis students teaching local children in the afternoon, and a feedback session in the evening.

JEAN URQUHART:
The Cèilidh Place, Ullapool

It’s the eve of Feis Rois Oighridh, the Junior Feis in Ullapool, particularly important in 2006 because it’s number 21. Rita Hunter has arrived with the sponsored car heavily laden with everything you might need if you are looking after 140 eight to eleven year olds for five days. That means everything from extra copies of sheet music to spare pyjamas; we are confident that nothing will have been forgotten, after endless check lists written and re-written in the past few weeks. This feis is special because all of the tutors assembled for this week were junior feis participants themselves. Here, then, is the proof of how this remarkable movement works; the circle is complete. These young musicians have come through the junior and senior feisean as participants, back as supervisors, as assistants to tutors, and now tutors themselves. The magic is that they all seem as eager and enthusiastic as they were when they first arrived clutching their whistles or fiddles to have that very first lesson. To mark the occasion there is a black and white photograph of the very first feis in 1986 given pride of place in the front lobby. Kate Martin and Christine Martin smiling from the photograph, taken at the end of that first event. Who would have thought then that it would have produced such a league of wonderful musicians and singers… and people?

I well remember the first feis held here in 1986. I remember the group of Councillors (Ross & Cromarty District Council were the funders) who came to inspect the accommodation. We were four bed-spaces short, with four double beds used as singles. As we stood in the bunk-house, I could see the minds of the councillors solving the problem. ‘Maybe we could put sisters together’ one said, ‘or maybe we could use sleeping bags’ said another. After great deliberation, it was agreed that the beds were big enough and the children small enough to create two bed-spaces in one and accommodate everyone. I remember too, the first tour of ‘bedroom duty’ when we were getting all forty settled down for the night, finding seven in one bed, and the one in the middle playing the bagpipes was the councillor’s son.

Gaelic language was central to each feis and the ‘cardboard and black marker’ signs that we made for rooms, such as ‘taigh-bìdhe’ were put up for the week, but in fact remained for a number of years. Gaelic was here to stay.

There are others more able than I to articulate the fantastic benefits for young people to take part in a feis and I know they will do that within the pages of this book. The whole movement has been the subject of consultants’ reports, rigorous inspection by funding agencies and scrutinised by the holders of the public purse. The ‘outcomes’ are large in the Celtic Connections programmes of recent years, in the pleasure of local folk at local céilidhs, in the choice of wonderful new bands and duets and trios of cello and fiddles or boxes and guitars and haunting voices.

The interest in traditional music continues to grow as young bands and singers take the tunes and songs of their roots on to a new and different plane. I know that Feis Rois will weave its magic in and around the children who arrive in Ullapool tomorrow morning full of eager expectation. They will make new friends, have different conversations, breathe different air, learn or further their skills in music and language. On the last night, after performing in the cèilidh, they will shed a tear and cling to new best pals and make promises to meet again at the next feis if not before.

Sarah, aged 10
They will have changed. Parents will collect different children on Friday night to those they left on Monday morning. For they are more worldly, more sure, and into their hearts has lodged some of their cultural inheritance.

In twenty-one years, some thousands of children and young people have come through Fèis Rois and I believe each acknowledges the gift and the responsibility it bestowed. They took the gifts of knowledge, inspiration, and friendship, and accepted the responsibility to pass them on. Those ‘graduates’ who are here tonight as tutors are pouring over the old black and white photograph, trying to identify the owners of the smiling young faces and remembering stories of their own from that or subsequent fèisean.

I came to live in the Highlands ‘BF’ – that is ‘Before Fèis’, and I cannot imagine living here without it now. I know that the movement has spread Scotland-wide and the country can only be the stronger and healthier for it. Right, I’m off to see who has forgotten their pyjamas… or worse, their penny whistle – for another amazing week is about to begin. Slàinte.

Nicola Marshall, Support Worker, Féisean nan Gàidheal

I went to Senior Fèis Rois when I was thirteen. I think I’d got to the point having been at a féis since I was eight, I didn’t want to be in classes with beginners, and it was the next step… I met a lot of people and have stayed in touch; I have a friend in Barra who I met through Fèis Rois. The level of tuition was good, and there was some group work, although I also played with Gizzenbriggs when I was at school. It’s a really hard question when someone says ‘what was good about the féis?’ The crack, memories of Gairloch Sands, step dancing in the kitchen, the fun.

Nicola Marshall, Support Worker, Féisean nan Gàidheal
CHRISTINE MARTIN:  
Strings Instructor  
In August 1987, I started a new job as strings teacher on Skye. There was no instrumental teaching in schools there at all then, except piping. After I’d been here for a year, I thought it would be a nice idea to have a fèis on Skye as well; after it had been such a success in Ross-shire. So I went to see John MacDonald, who was head of Community Education at the time; John wasn’t sure about how we could fund it, but the second year I was there I knew I had a lot of children who could play, and I felt sure we could do something really good, so I went to see John again, and he said he would speak to the District Council and see if they would help with some funding. Fortunately they were able to help, not only with funding, but also with support from a Council employee, Morag Greenshields, who was very organised. In subsequent years, Community Worker Karen Farquharson took over from Morag, and Kate Martin also helped out one year. I had kept all the programmes and notes that Kate and I had worked out for Fèis Rois, so that the Skye and Lochalsh programme was worked out in a similar way with local amendments, and I designed the Fèis an Earraich logo for the publicity to be sent out to parents and pupils. The first year we held the fèis in Plockton, because of the school hostel there, and it was really very successful. I contacted some of the tutors we’d used in Ross-shire, as they were experienced teachers and players, and knew what was needed for our fèis participants. We had an age limit for Fèis an Earraich; children had to be in primary five or above, and we offered classes to adults to ‘come and try’ different instruments in the evening, while the children had sports and arts activities. It was a good opportunity for adult learners, but some of the tutors felt that was a heavy workload as they’d been teaching all day. We had a tutors’ cèilidh too, and the sessions were just amazing.

The most exciting thing for me is to see the number of young people who have come through the fèis system as children and have come back as tutors. And as well as that, the bonds that are made at fèisean remain there forever.

Rae MacColl, Dance tutor
The driving force for Feis an Earraich was Christine Martin. When Christine had lived in Tain, she had been involved in Feis Rois, and she was keen to see something similar established in Skye. I was in Community Education at the time, and was quite interested in the idea myself. So we arranged to call a meeting of interested parties, and initial responses were very positive. Maggie Cunningham was involved; she was living in Plockton at the time. We did the secretarial and administrative work in Community Education, and various people served on the committee. I remember it was the early part of 1989; we were planning to start in 1990, but everyone said ‘let’s try it this year’, so we did. We very quickly arranged for something to take place at Easter, 1989; that was the first one. We decided to have the feis during the second week of the Easter break, so that tutors could come down from Ullapool; which meant a two-week commitment rather than one week.

Children came from contact with schools, music groups and tutors, and it went amazingly well, considering the short time to plan it. We had a good team around us who were involved in youth work and the Gaelic language; some are still involved, people like John Martin for example. Everyone worked really well together and having the residential accommodation and use of the school at Plockton was great, not just the use of the school for tuition but also in the evening activities, the games hall, badminton courts and swimming pool at Kyle. And there was a very good response from the local community, largely through Maggie’s contacts and involvement. The Accordion and Fiddle Club came in one night, and people were standing back to see what it was like, and then got involved in the second and third years. It was fantastic, very successful; not just for the participants but for ourselves as organisers.

In the first year we offered as subjects: piping, fiddle, clarsach, Gaelic singing, drama, tin whistle, guitar, dancing – not Highland dance though, there was some resistance on behalf of the tutors to have Highland dance taught – perhaps because it was already being taught locally – so dance was Scottish ceilidh and community dancing. We had a great team of tutors, some local, like the late Iain MacDonald, and Iain MacFadyen, who was teaching in schools on a weekly basis, and saw it as a way of boosting his regular tuition as the feis offered a chance to do some concentrated work. We worked hard to involve the schools, and let them know what was happening. We learned from experience of other feisean that some school music departments weren’t particularly supportive of the feis idea, particularly those involved in teaching.

We had feis groups out in Hungary, France and Estonia, the Basque area of Spain, and Germany...
classical music. So it was a way of trying to tread gently, but make sure that young people had a good experience too. Tutors like Christine Martin and Iain MacFadyen encouraged their pupils to come, and that made sure there was a good nucleus. Then there were people teaching in the community, like Iain MacDonald, Kirsteen Graham and Mary Strachan who were working in schools, and were able to explain the fèis to head teachers. Some teachers helped to promote the fèis very well.

We did an exercise after the fèis to see where the children came from, and specifically what areas they hadn’t come from, so that we could focus on that; for example we had to do a bit more work in the north end of Skye and in the secondary schools. Once the children had been to the fèis and had an enjoyable experience they were keen to come back next year, and they would tell their friends what it was all about. Some of them were also involved in follow-up classes; we tried to make it not just a week’s event in the year, but to have some kind of continuity throughout the year.

The most satisfying aspect of it was the tremendous buzz that it engendered in the first couple of years; it was a big event and a lot of responsibility. Many of the children were away from home for the first time, and it was good for them to meet children from other areas. I often remember when they went into secondary school in Portree, ‘they would say, ‘oh, I know so-and-so from the fèis’, and they began to build up links with children from other schools whom they wouldn’t normally meet; so that was an unexpected and successful by-product of the fèis. I think for those children who are musically gifted, it gave them more opportunities. For example, at that time there were music and dance youth exchanges throughout Highland Region, and a number of young people who were involved in fiddle, piping or dancing got the chance through the fèis to take part in exchanges with other young people. We had fèis groups out in Hungary, France and Estonia, the Basque area of Spain, and Germany, and hosted partner groups from these countries in return.

I think we were trying to see it as a way to link music and language, and perhaps quite quickly the music side became stronger. We were always trying to encourage use of the language; we had a very high participation level of children from Gaelic-medium education, and we were always trying out activities which would associate language with music. In the early days we were able to get Gaelic-speaking tutors, so we were able to try to work out classes in such a way that we had Gaelic-speaking tutors with Gaelic-speaking participants. I think we might have been a bit stricter about the children’s use of Gaelic. There was always a debate within the committee about whether it should be Gaelic medium exclusively, or whether it should be for everyone. We didn’t want to exclude people or cause any ill-feeling but at the same time include both Gaelic speakers and children who didn’t have any other opportunity to learn Gaelic. That, I suppose, weakened the Gaelic content a bit. We tried to encourage Gaelic speakers and those who were really interested in the language, to go also to the Gaelic-medium fèis in Inverness. Young people did get an opportunity to be introduced
I’ve been going to Fèis an Earraich for around seven years now, and look forward to it each year. It’s good to go and meet people your own age and learn tunes in a relaxed and friendly environment. If I had never attended the fèis I don’t think I’d know nearly so many tunes, would not have met so many musicians of my age, or have learned the little Gaelic I know now. Cìche mhath!

Fèis an Earraich participant, aged 16

tí clasaichean gu bhith a’ ruith air an Dùlain air feadh an eilein. Uaireannan bidh mi a’ tadhail air Féisean eile agus a’ togail ‘ideas’ bhuapa. Nuair a tha mi air a bhith a’ teagasc aig Féisean eile bidh mi a’ smaoineachadh air rudan a dh’fhaoadadain fhuechainn. Bu toil leamsa tòrr a bharrachd a dhèanamh a chailleadh an rudair dh’fhabh.

Kirsteen Graham

Cathraiche Fèis an Earraich


Ann an doigh ‘s e obair na fèise an rud as cudromaiche a th’air a bhith nam bheatha thairis air na deich bliadhna a dh’ fhàbh. Chan eil seachdain ann nach eil mi a’ deanamh rudug eadar clasaichean oidheachd a’ cur na feis fhèin air doigh. Nuair a thig an Dùbhchladh no am Facilleach bidh mi fhoireann Peigi (an rùnair) air a’ fhum h-uile feasgar a’ bruidhinn ri spòiltan, tidsearann is hostaillean. Bith sinn a’ sgòribadh litirichean, a’ deanamh litirichean Chlonn no luchd-teagaisg agus a’ sgòribadh chinnntasan. Tha e dìreach a’ dol gun sgur fad a’ gheimhridh.

Tha sinne air fás cleachdte ris a h-uile rud tro eòlas – ‘experience’. A h-uile bliadhna bidh sinn a’ smaoineachadh air rudeigin beagan diofraichte a’ ri sinn; bidh sinn a’ feuchann rud air. Tha clasaichean ura againn aig an fhèis agus tha sinn a’ deanamh rudan mar seisean-cèilidh, dannsa no cluiche cómhla gach latha. Cuideachd, bidh a h-uile duine a’ cruinneachadh gus òran na fèise ionsachadh. Thairis air na bladhnaichean tha sin air tuilleadh clasaichean a chrur air doigh: ealain, group-work agus percussion. Nan tigeadh cuideachd aon-bhith ann an-dìthig a bha aig an fhèis aig toiseachan na naolachd, bhiodh iad a’ fàcinn eadar-dhealachd móin.

An-dràsta chan eil ann ach ceithir clasaichean-oidheachd a’ ruith tron t-seachdain aicbhidh barrachd ann fhathast. A’ h-uile Dùlain bidh mi a’ feitheadh ris a’ fòn a’ dol agus fear dhe na tòirt agam ag rádh ‘Tha an car agam briste!’ no ‘Tha snaedch air an rathad!’ An uair sin bidh agam aon rud aon rud a dor ar thàite-fhùitich haighinn airson anns an-tòirt. Chòrd i rùm gu mòr: âite math le sgoil agus ostail ann.

Bha sinn aig Sabhal Mòr Ostaig bliadhna. Bha na rùmmanan air leth ach cha robh rummanan gu leòr agus airson teagaisg. An-uiridh bha sinn ann an Taigh Òsda ann an Caol Acainn. Is toil leamsa Caol Acainn; tha na daoine uabhasach laghach agus bha sinn a’ fàitheadh mar phàirt den bhaile. Ann am Port Rìgh chan eil fhios aig daoine gu bheil sinn ann, ach bha ann an Caol Acainn. Tha talla math aca an-sin – math airson dantha agus rudan mar
sin. Tha e doirbh ann am Port Rìgh, oir tha an sgoil agus Àros caran beag airson a’ chonsairst dheireannaich. Bidh daoine an-còmhnaidh a’ sti’ airson faighinn a-staigh.

Tha sinn air a bhith uabhasach soirbheachail ann a’ cumail nan deugairean. Tha e math dhan fheadhainn òga a bhith a’ cluinnt dè tha an fheadhainn nas sine a’ deànarn agus iadsan a’ faireachd dhuinn ‘uill, ma chumas mise a’ dol ann, ‘s docha gum bi mise a’ cluiche mar sin nuair a dh’fhàsas mise mòr is ciallach.

Dh’fhéuch sinn Fèis nan Deugairean a’ ruthig an aon am ris an fhèis. Rinn sinn tir no ceithir bladhna dheth. A’ chiad bhliadhna bhà e gle mhath s tha mi a smaoineachadh gun robh cóig daoine deug againn s’ thaing iadsan bho sgrìeann eile. Chaidh na h-àireamhan sos ge-tà agus sgur sin dhen fhèis, ach chum na deugairean orra a’ tighinn.

Tha e math a bhith a’ fheicinn theaghlaichean a’ fàs tron fhèis; a’ coimhead air na h-àireamhan, b’ abhaist dhaibh uile sgur anns an dara bliadhna den árd-sgoil, ach dítheis ní triúr.

An uair sin, bha iad uabhasach òg airson bladhna no dhà. Agus thòisich sinn a’ deànarn group work cómhla riutha. Bha sin na chuideachd, a bhith ag obair cómhla agus a bhith a toirt ‘curran’ dhaibh leis na tursan a dh’Eìrin. Feumaidh tu ‘catalyst’ fhìaighinn agus an còmhnaidh tha duine no dòthi anns gach bladhna a’ tarrainn dhaoine eile. Sin an t-adhbhair’s gu bheil sinn a’ deànarn rudan eile mar an toras gu Armag. Bhà sinn anns a’ Ghearnaitl aon bhiadhla agus Eilean a’ Phhrionnsa ann an Canada cómhla ris na deugairean. Tha mise deòbhaich a dhól a dh’àireamh a bhith leòtha. Tha mi a smaoineachadh gu bheil e m’orbhalleach daoine fhaicinn a tha air tilleadh dhan fhèis mar luchd-teagaig, ach cuimhnhich gu bheil triúr aca càirdeach dhìomhsa! Cuideachd bidh aon fhèidheann anns a’ chòigeamh neo an t-sàithiamh bladhna ag ràdh riomha, ‘an ath bhliadhna ann faod mi ti leadh air ais mar ‘supervisor’ agus feumaidh iad ‘apprenticeship’ a dhèanamh. Chan fhaigh iad air ais mar ‘tutor’ aig an t-bhliadhna agus feumaidh iad co-dhùbh bladhna a dhèanamh mar ‘superviser’. Tha e a’ còrdadh riutha. Tha na ‘supervisors’ a ghabh gu cruidhach fad na seachdain agus bidh a dh’fhàghinn deagh oideachta Haineach as deidh na feise a-muigh cómhla ris na ‘tutors’, ach cha tuirt mise sin!

Bidh sinn ag ëisteachd ris a’ chlann agus ‘s dochra gur e sin a’ bhhuannachd leis a’ chlann agam fhèin a bhith ann – bidh iad ag ràdh ’na deòbha sinn a-rithist!’ Uaireannan nuair a thilleas mi dhàn sgoil as dèidh na feise bi clann ag inns dhomh dè na rudaan a chòrd riutha.

A h-uile bladhna bidh sinn a’ cur a-mach cuairt-litir ag inns do dhaoine na bhios sinn a’ deànarn airson a’ gheamhradh, cuin a bhios an fhèin ann agus gu bheil poca mòr dubh fhathast anns an taigh agam lán stuth a chailt daoine! Bidh sinn ag inns do phàrantan gu bheil iad lán dubh dhìuhb ag iarraidh aubh air a’ chomataidh; thà ghe bheag dhìuhb ag iarraidh aubh air a’ chomataidh agus thà ghe bhèag thà sinn ag obair math cómhla agus thà sinn gu math dòighil. Tha a h-uile duine a’ chomataidh o chionn’s

Chaidh mi gu Fèis an Earraich airson a’ chriad turas nuair a bha mi ochd bliadhna a dh’aois agus tha mi air a dhòl air ais a h-uile bliadhna bhon uairsin. Chòrd e rium gu mòr agus ’se deagh chothrom a bh’ann a h-uile bliadhna rudeigin ur ionnsachadh.

Fèis an Earraich participant, aged 16
When I think back to that small group playing in Plockton Hall at the start of June and then the professional outfit that were playing at the Celtic Chaos festival in September, they were amazing.

We’ve learned a lot through experience. Every year we try something different, such as group work, a ceilidh session or everyone coming together to learn a ‘feis song’. Over the years we’ve arranged new classes, art, groupwork and percussion. There’s still the same basic structure, but someone who was at the feis at the beginning would notice a difference.

I first became involved in Fèis an Earraigh in 1989, when my children started to attend. I joined the committee around 1991 and when John MacDonald resigned as chair in 1995, I took his place. Sometimes I visit or teach at other feisean and pick up ideas from there. I would like us to do a lot more but we can’t – most people work voluntarily so there’s a limit to what we can do.

At the start of the nineties we had sixty children participating and now we have over a hundred and fifty. We have to change things over time, according to needs. The numbers show that people do come from all over the area, although there is still a lack of participants from some parts of Skye and Lochalsh. Hopefully with the Youth Music Initiative project we’ll see more coming from the schools.
We have been very successful in keeping the teenagers coming to the féis. It’s good for the younger ones to hear what the older ones are doing and think ‘if I keep practising, maybe I’ll sound like that when I’m older’. We tried running the Teen Féis at the same time as the féis itself, and had fifteen participants from different areas. We started doing group work with the older ones working together helped them a great deal. We also offer them incentives in the form of the exchange trips; we’ve had them in the form of a great deal. We also offer working together helped them work with the older ones; areas. We started doing group participants from different the féis itself, and had fifteen Fèis at the same time as I’m older’. We tried running the what the older ones are doing for the younger ones to hear coming to the féis. It’s good in keeping the teenagers trouble. We have someone in charge of our Child Protection policy and they keep in touch with all developments. You have to be aware and keep to the guidelines; everyone on the committee and involved in teaching or supervising at the féis has to have a Disclosure Scotland check. But that’s the way of the world. I have to get a check for the school, for the church, even to teach an evening class. Only occasionally do you get tired of it – volunteer fatigue as it’s called. But I believe that I get more out of it than I put in. The féis is very important. I don’t think I’ve ever done something that I enjoy so much. I love my job too, but when the féis is running you get so much enjoyment out of it.

In the future I’d like to see something running every week. Much has happened over the past ten years and we hope to continue that work with further plans for a trip to Ireland and more follow-on classes. We started the Ceilidh Trail in the summer of 2005, with Deidre, my daughter, running the project. The group did very well and came together again for the Blas festival. When I think back to that small group playing in Plockton Hall at the start of June and then the professional outfit that were playing at the Celtic Chaos festival in September, they were amazing. They played with certainty and performed professionally on the stage. Have you ever been in your village after midnight? You’ll see a group of teenagers with nothing much to do. This happens in all towns and they always say there’s nothing to do. But you don’t see anyone suffering from boredom at the féis. If you have an interest, a hobby or a talent, what is better than to put that to use?

PEGGY NICOLSON: Fèis an Earraich Administrator
I first went along to a committee meeting just to help out. My son Angus had been to the féis and thoroughly enjoyed it. The fèisean don’t just happen without a lot of work behind the scenes, so when I went along I got landed with work! At that meeting in 1996, my name was put forward as administrator. I willingly said yes and it’s been good. Our committee hasn’t changed much; eight to ten members do a lot of work, voluntarily. The volume of participants is the biggest change. In 2005 we were in the King’s Arms Hotel in Kyleakin; and some kids travelled daily, but most stayed. We’ve had to increase the numbers of subject tutors and supervisors although the number of subjects has stayed the same. I think that to maintain the quality of the féis you have to draw a line on numbers. I think that 150 in Kyleakin is sufficient for us, especially in a year when an exchange trip is happening. In Portree in 2006 a hundred and twenty was enough. But you always try to fit people in and try not to turn them away.

We’ve been developing an exchange link with Armagh, in Northern Ireland for about five or six years now and next year it will be Fèis an Earraich’s turn to go to Ireland. We’re hoping to develop that further by visiting a group in the Republic of Ireland – Donegal or Galway – but that’s still to be looked into. I think the link with Ireland is a great achievement.

The féis used to alternate between Plockton and Portree. When the school hostel in Plockton was revamped, to accommodate the National Centre of Excellence in Traditional Music, we lost quite a number of beds there. When I first started the féis was in Plockton and we had to bus in those who weren’t staying. The following year we had the final concert in Aros, which was quickly sold out. Every year you find solutions to the problems, so now we sell tickets to the final concert in advance. We have year-round classes in fiddle, accordion, drumming, piping, clarsach and piano. It gives some kids, especially those too young to attend the féis, a taste of what it’s like to attend a class. Also, it shows a bit of commitment to carry on playing. Money is always a concern, but we do get grant aid from the Fèisean nan Gàidheal fund. The Gaelic Choirs and Piping Societies of Skye and Lochalsh have been very supportive by sponsoring a tutor, and Iomairt Chaluim Chille have been helpful in their funding for our exchange trips. We’ve never been unduly worried.

Hector Henderson from Portree, my son Angus Nicolson from Sleat, Isabel Strachan from Breakish and all the Grahams are just a few of the people who have come back to tutor at the féis, having been participants before. It’s encouraging to see them come back. They enjoy it as participants, come back as assistant tutors, and then go on to be the main tutors at the féis. They love it and I think younger kids aspire to that. The féis is a great week of informal lessons for kids to further their own musical or artistic ability, to mix with kids their own age and have a good time. For the future we would like to maintain the current standard of féis, get the best tutors available, (especially in a week when other Fèisean are running) and develop more links with Ireland.
RAE MACCOLL:
Dance tutor and former feis organiser

I first got involved because I saw the fèis as the way ahead for young people and for keeping the traditions alive. With regards to dancing, children in the past didn’t have access to dancing in its cultural and traditional sense. They tended to be involved in competitive dancing, usually Highland.

In the wider sense the most amazing thing about the fèisean was that the children had access to instruments that they wouldn’t normally be able to try. They could try anything whether they were good at it or not, they could at least attempt it. I saw dance as important because children learning music or singing could explore them to a greater extent through dance; they could dance to music and song.

When the fèis started up it was quite exciting, but scary at the same time! It was residential, so the children had to be cared for day and night. The days were taken up with tuition and in the evenings you could then introduce other cultural experiences for the children, widening the whole idea of the culture being beyond a language. There’s no doubt the participants have benefited tremendously. Music has enhanced the lives of many fèis participants. Many have even taken up music on a professional basis.

Without the fèisean we would be missing some very good musicians and a lot of young people would be unaware of culture in the Highlands and Islands. They might even be totally ignorant of the music, song and dance within their own areas. A lot of children only have access to Highland dancing, so in the early days, it was about widening people’s awareness of dance. It’s now gone from reels and ceilidh dancing to step-dancing, which might otherwise have died out.

The most exciting thing for me is to see the number of young people who have come through the fèis system as children and have come back as tutors. The bonds that are made at fèisean remain there forever — a huge strength of the fèisean.

The most exciting thing for me is to see the number of young people who have come through the fèis system as children and have come back as tutors. The bonds that are made at fèisean remain there forever — a huge strength of the fèisean.
Fèis Tìr a’ Mhurain

South Uist & Benbecula 1989

MAIRI NICAONGHAIS:
Ball, Fèis Tìr a’ Mhurain


Thàinig buidheann mhath de mhàthraichean às Na Meadhanach fhathormhaidh an àm, d’reach airson feum a’ Ghàidhlig a chumail a’ dol an toiseach. Bha Maighstir Aonghas MacCuithine, a bha na shaogar ann an Bòirnis a’ bhith ag na leithid a’ chumail a’ dol an toiseach thà ma smaointinn. Bha Maighstir Aonghas MacCuithine, a bha na shaogar ann an Bòirnis a’ bhith ag na leithid a’ chumail a’ dol an toiseach thà ma smaointinn. Bha Maighstir Aonghas MacCuithine, a bha na shaogar ann an Bòirnis a’ bhith ag na leithid a’ chumail a’ dol an toiseach thà ma smaointinn.

Tha cuimhne agam a’ bhliadhna a charadh sinn a dh’Èirinn bha fichead dhiubh againn ’s bha sinn a’ dol a-null ’s dh’fheumadh tu na h-ainmean a thoirt seachad anns an Fhaoilleach airson ’s gum faigheadh tu a’ phrìs a bh’fhuaire. Chuir sinn seachad a h-uile ainm — ’s e John MacDonald cha mhòr a bh’air a h-uile duine!
2. Feis

The first Feis

Na daoine a’ dèanamh gu saor – mar a bhios rud sam bith a bhios i glè mhath. Bha i trang, riaslach chaidh an fhèis air adhart ’s bha ’s eile. Ach a dh’aindeoin sin, foghlam ’s air a’ Chomhairle ’s feadhainn dhiubh sin an lùib ’s bha deannan math de dhaoine air tòiseachadh a’ bristeadh suas Cuideachd, bha Gàidhlig caran anns na h-eileanan aig an àm. Na Gàidhlig ach gu math òg robh foghlam tro mheadhan ùpraid gu leòr an lùib sin s cha teagaisg agus aig a’ chloinn. Bha a h-uile duine, aig an luchd-mar sin Gàidhlig a bhith aig an Gàidhlig agus gum feumte biodh an teagasg air fad ann chuir sinn romhain gum Bhon a’ chiad dol a-mach, an-sin a thòisich e.

Bhn a’ chiad dol a-mach, chuirt sin romhainn gum biodh an teagasc air fad ann an Gàidhlig agus gum feumte mar sin Gàidhlig a bhith aig a h-uile duine, aig an luchd-teagasc agus aig a’ chloinn. Bha upraid gu leòr an lùib sin s cha robh foghlam tro mheadhan na Gàidhlig ach gu math òg anns na h-eileanan aig an àm. Cuideachd, bha Gàidhlig caran air toiseachadh a’ bristeradh suas ’s bha deannan math de dhaoine a bha an aghaidh na Gàidhlig ’s feadhainn dhùibh sin an lùib foghlam ’s air a’ Chomhairle ’s eile. Ach a dh’aindeoin sin, chaidh an fhèis air adhart ’s bha i gle mhatth. Bha i trang, riaslach mar a bhios rud sam bith a bhios daoine a’ deanamh gu saor-
tholeach agus cha robh mòran airgid na lùib. Tha mi cinn teach nach do choch a’ chaidh fhèis ach ma dh’fhaoiide mu mhile nòt no rudeigin agus tha mi a creidinn gu sin o Chomhairle nan Ealan a fhuaire sin e. Bha daoine mar John Murphy taiceil agus saolaidh mi gun robh Maly MacLleatthin laird mun cuairt cuideachd – d’reach duine no dhà mar sin a’ch a’ choimhearsnachd fhèin a chuirt air adhart i agus bha i flor mhath. Bha taic h-mhor againn bho Ishbel T. NicDhòmhnaill a thaobh chuspairann ’s chlasaichean ’s rudan mar sin. Bha mi fhèin nam thidsear agus bha beagan eòlais agam air time-tables agus bha dèithe no trìur eile aig an robh dìofoir gilean agus thàinig sin còmhla fhèin a dhuine air adhart bud a bha fhor mhath.

Bha dràma agus seinn ann agus dh’fhéumadh a’ chlann air fad a dhol chun na talla son sin ’s bha pòibaireachd agus ceòl a’ bhocsa ann. Tha mi a smaoinneachd agus robh dàonna ann ’s bha cròileagan ann cuideachd a thaobh ’s ann aig an àm sin a bha deannan math de dhìth anuinn ann. Bha an tè bu shine agam fhèin ann a bha ceithir bliadhna aig an ’am agus bha sin a’ gabhail clann bho aois ceithir suas gu cóig bliadhna deug. Cha robh againn aig an toiseachach ach tri ne cèitin cuspaireann. Bha sin a’ cheann air cuspaireann far am b’ urainn dhit a bhith cleachadhadh na Gàidhlig ’s far nach fhéumadh tu a bhith buileach math air seinn. Cha robh diofar dè an comas a bh’ agad fhada s a bha Gàidhlig agad ’s gun toireadh sin a’ chlann air adhart.

Saolaidh mi gun robh gu robh eadar deich duine fichead ’s leth-chead cloinne ann ach ’s e dhreach clann Úilbhist fhèin a bh’ sin – clann nam Meadhanain ’s clann a h-chochdair bh’ ann a toiseach, ’s duine no dhà a Beinn na Foaghla. Gle ghoirid an déidh dhan fhèis toiseachadh thòisich sin aig ceangal a dhèanamh a dhèanamh ri pròiseactan eile. Bha sin a’ déanamh pròiseactan dràma ’s thug sin deannan de dhaoin ogra a dh’Einnn airson seachdadh agus bha sin a’ toirt a-staigh luchd-ciùil airson feisean beaga a dhèanamh ann a’ chaidh tri no cèitin bliadhnaichean de dh’ Fhèis Tir a Mhurain.

Bha slugh mòr de dh’oiridh ann agus bha iad uile cho deònach agus bha na pàrantan cho taiceil ’s cho deònach ’s ag iarraidh rudan a char air adhart. Bha talla na h-eaglais ann a bh’ Boirnis a’ dol aig an t-am sin ’s bha Maighsthir Aonghas fhèin cho math gu biorasachd a thòirt dhan a h-uile duine. Nuair a thigeadh muintir an aigrid agus na h-uaislean bhiodh esan a’ déanamh biadh ’s deoch ’s bhiodh iad air an lán dòigh. Mar sin bha daoine gu math taiceil.

’S e sin cuideachd an t-àm a bha foghlam tro mheadhan na Gàidhlig a’ dol ’s bha na cròileagan ’s glasadan gu leòr eile a’ tachart. Thug sin neart airson a bhith a’ cur rudan gu math na mostha air adhart. Bha an feadhainn aig nach rorob Gàidhlig ag iarraidh a bhith a-staigh air an rud a bha a’ tachart ach bha sin a’ cumail gu math teann rins gu gum feumadh Gàidhlig a bhith aca. Chan eil suidheachaidh na Gàidhlig a’ tighinn air adhart cho math ’s a bu chóir dha a bhith agus tha gu leòr den feadhainn sin a tha a’ tighinn gu Feis Tir a Mhurain a-nis cuideachd a’ tighinn bho tir-mòr ach ’s e deailbhe eile a tha sin gu bheil iad a’ tighinn gu na h-eileanan airson feis Gàidhlig fhìaghinn.

Tha Feis Tir a Mhurain air a bhith a’ cumail a’ dol airson cóig bliadhna deug no sia bliadhna.
Deug agus tha i a’ cumail na Gàidhlig ris a’ chloinn. ’S e rud math a th’ ann muinntir na coimhearsnachd a bhith ag obair. Còmhlach gus rud a chur air airdhart agus rud a tha a bhualadh air a’ coimhearsnachd aca fhèin. Tha mi a’ smaoineadachd gu bheil a’ h-ule rud a tha a’ dol saor-thoilicheach gu e rud math a th’ ann agus tha e a’ toirt beagan airgid a-staigh cuideachd. Tha e a’ ciallachadh gu bheil rudeigin a’ dol anns na spoiltean fad an t-samhraidh ‘s gu bheil rudan ann a’ rì a’ chlann.

Bha an fhèis ann an Lìonacleit an toiseach ach an uair sin, dhò a’ toirt bliadhnaichean air ais, thug a’ chomataidh sùil air a’ ghnothaich ‘s bha na h-àireamhan a’ tuiteam gu mòr agus bha iad a’ smaoineadachd s’ dòcha gum biodh e freagarrach a stèidheadach ann an coimhearsnachd Sgoil Dhàlabroig. Rinne iad sin agus bha sin gu math soirthreachadh. Cuideachd tha iad am bliadhna ga feachann ann an Sgoil an Iochdair agus tha mi a’ smaoineadachd gu bheil seo dol a dh’obrachadh gle mhath. Bha dhò a’ toirt gu phróiseactan dràma againn. Bha Arthur Donald againn – tha mi a’ smaoineadachd gu e taic a bha sinn a’ faighinn bhon a’ próiseact aig Malky agus a-rithist Comhairle nan Ealan agus tha mi cinn-teach Comunn na Gàidhlig, Bhiodh Artair Donald agus Wilma Kennedy is dheach an fheadhainn an luib sin a’ tighinn a dh’fhuireach còmhlach rúim, Bha cuideachd Blair Douglas againn turas a’ chòmhairle aon ceol, bha sinn a’ cur ceol’ s dràma còmhlach agus aonson ’s gus dh’fhuireach feum de Sgoil Lìonacleit agus na goireasan a th’ ann an-sin. Dh’obraich sin gu leòr a bha a’ Gàidhlig che math anns an àite ‘s an fheadhainn a ch’ thu, an fheadhainn a bha an luib na feis – sin an fheadhainn a bh’ ann aig toiseach gothaich.

Tha cuimhne agam a’ bhliadhna a chaidh sinn a dh’ suitability a bh’ fheadhainn a bh’ Eininn bha fichdeach dhuibheadh againn ‘s bha sinn a’ dol a-null ’s dh’fhiumadadh tu na h-albanach a thoirt seachad anns an Fhuileal aonson ‘s gum faighheadh tu a’ phìos a bu shaoire. Chuir sinn seachad a h-ule isinn – ‘s e John MacDonald cha mhòr a bh’ air a h-ule duine! Co-dhiù, chuir Comunn na Gàidhlig bus air doigh dhuinn agus ràinig sinn am port-adhainn ann an Ghlaschu aig seachad uairean anns a’ mhìadhainn ’s cha robh am plèan againn a’ falbh gu aon uair deug. Tha mi cinn-teach gu roibh ‘s bha sinn a’ gearan nach bruaidhneadh iad a’ Gàidhlig co-dhiù. ’S bha Ann ag ràdh ‘Gàidhlig? Tha mi coma ged nach biodh facal Gàidhlig aca – nam biodh morals aca!’ ‘S mise a’ feuchainn an leigeil a-mach air an oidheach agus Ann a’ feuchainn rin cur dhan leabaidh! Och, bha fealla-dhà ’s spòrs gu leòr na luib ’s bha Maighstir Aonghas fhèin cho math co-dhiù air a h-uile rud a dhèanamh ’s bha spòrs gu leòr.
2. feis

fhein cho math co-dhiù air a-huile rud a dhéanamh ‘s bha spòrs gu leòr ann.

Thug sinn a-null buidheann a dhéanamh danna agus chuir sinn air adhart dealbh-luichd bheag; chuir sinn muintir Uibhist air an ardr-urlar an sin ann an Gweedore ‘s bha e gle mhath. Bha sin mar phàirt de dh’fhéis le pòbailreachd air an t-sràid ‘s rudan mar sin. ‘S e rud ùr a bha sin dhùinn agus ‘s e cothrom math a bh’ ann dhan oighridh a dhol a dh’fhacinn de bha tachair.

‘S e danhsa Hebridean a bha sinn a dhéanamh, a’ cumail ris nach robh e freagarrach danhsa, dhànan Gàidhealach mar a chanas iad, a thòrrt a-steach agus cha do rinn sin sin.

Tha mi ’smaoineachadh – thad’s a’ithne dhon mh’ s e Fèis Tìr a’ Mhurain an aon fhèis anns na h-Eileanan an Iar a tha gu cunbhalach Gàidhlig, Feumaidh mi moladh a thòrrt dhànaidh nan tachair a tha an lùib a bhith ga cuir air adhart an-dìugh gu do chum iad ris a’ phoileasaidh a thànaidh anns agus chan eil feis eile ann an Uibhist a Deas ach sin. Tha mi a’ ‘smaoineachadh gu bheil i a’ dhéanamh obair mhath s’ a-nisd tha mise an sàs anns an a bhuidheann Ceòlas ‘s tha sinn ann an suidheachadh far a’ bhanann dhùinn taic mhath a thòrrt do mhuingtir na feis e ‘s tha sinn a’rachaidh ceud de dh’airgead fhluathair airson teagasg do dh’oiridh a chuir air adhart ag obair còmhla ris an fhéis. Mar sin tha mi ’smaoineachadh gu bheil i a’ deagh an deagh suidheachadh a nis.

MARY MACINNES:
Fèis Tìr a’ Mhurain member

(English summary)

Fèis Tìr a’ Mhurain started in 1989, the first year after Sgoil Lionacleit opened. There was a bit of concern at this time as some of the primary schools were closing due to the opening of a new high school. There was uncertainty as to what would happen in communities with schools closing, so a group of mothers came together to set up a fèis, to keep the Gaelic going. Fèis Bharraigh had already started and we knew that good things were happening there. We were certain from the outset that it would be a Gaelic fèis. We also saw the fèis as a good way of using Sgoil Lionacleit, as the school was new with good facilities. It was great having this new school, and we thought it would be good to get the younger children into it.
We decided that all teaching should be in Gaelic, so all tutors and participants were to have Gaelic. This caused plenty of upset, as Gaelic Medium education had just started in the islands, and there were many who were against Gaelic, some of whom were involved in education and councils. Despite this the feis went ahead, only costing about £1000, and we got money from the Arts Council.

Children had to take either drama or singing and then there was piping, accordion, and whistle. We had a crotalean as there were many young children about at that time, and had children between the ages of 4 and 15. We did art as well and looked for subjects where everyone could use Gaelic no matter how good they were at music. We had between 30 and 50 children the first year and the numbers grew steadily.

Shortly after the feis began we went ahead, only costing about £1000, and we got money from the Arts Council. We had a drama project and took it one step further and started up other projects as well.

We had a croileagan, as there were many young children and 15. We did art as well and had a drama project, in order to make sure that everyone is happy and working together. Local people are in charge of things but at the same time we have to draw in any skills we don’t have ourselves.

One year we went to Ireland, and we had to give the names of the people travelling in advance, and when I gave over the names, almost everybody was John McDonald. It was a dance group that we took to Ireland, and we put on a small play as well. We were part of a feis over the summer, with things like piping in the street. We did Hebridean dancing, not Highland dancing, as we wanted to keep to what was traditional in the area.

As far as I know, Feis Tir a’ Mhurain is the only Western Isles feis that is completely in Gaelic, and I congratulate those who are involved in it today for keeping to that policy. I’m involved with Feis Tir a’ Mhurain now, and we are in a position where we can give support to the feis.

Ceòlas is a feis for adults, and although it wasn’t as a result of Feis Tir a’ Mhurain, my involvement in this came from the experience of the feis. I was involved for the first five years of the feis and it gave me great training in community work and putting on arts events in communities. It was also important in helping me make contacts, which is very important as the Gaelic world is so small, and I keep coming across the same people.

We have had a few drama projects, with people such as Arthur Donald, Wulma Kennedy and Blair Douglas, to bring music and drama together, in order to make use of the theatre facilities in Lionacleit School. The people who were participating in the feis in those days are the stars today!

LEN A NIC GILL ‘FHALAIN:
Feis Tir a’ Mhurain

Bha úidh agam anns na h-òrain agus an ceòl co-dhiù air saileabh gun robh iad anns a Chàidhlig agus ‘s e sin a thug orm sàileabh gun robh dh’iug antha ann aigh a bha toil agam gum faighheadh iad foighlmann tro mheadhan na Gàidhlig, chàithdhi air a’ chomataidh agus bha mi grunn bhliadhnaichean an sàs ann aig an ire sin. Bha mi cudachd ag obair do Chomunn na Gàidhlig aig an ann agus bha mi nam cho-òrdanaiche air an fhéin airson dhaonairt. Dha thar thoradh ri tir bheag ghrinn an uair sin tron obair agam.

Tha a’ Chàidhlig cho laidir inntse ‘s gu bheil a’ chlann a’ fhaithinn na h-òrain agus an ceòl a bha inntse an uair sin duine dhan èite cuideachd.

Mar a tha fhios agaibh, thug iad a-mach CD ‘s leabhar’s sin de na h-òrain a bhuineas do dh’Ulбhrist. Tha ceangal gu math laidir aca ris a’ chànain a tha sin. Bha cuideachd a’ chomataidh den bheachd na h-òrain a bhuineas dhan èite fhèin a’ chur ann an leabhar agus bha iad a’ bhruidhinn ri Fhèinseal T NicDhomhnaill agus chuir ise ri cheile an leabhar a bha sin dhaoibh.

Chàidh e math – chan eil cuimhne agam cia mheudh dhein sin a reic iad ach bha h-uile duine ga iarradh, bha iad ag iarradh nan CD’s.

Tha a’ meidhinn nuair a bha mi nam cho-òrdanaiche ‘s e dreach a bhith ann a h-òrailth a bhà a bhith a’ déanamh cinnteach gun robh a h-òrailth duine far am bu choir dhàibh a bhith ‘s gun robb sinn a’ déanamh mar a bha a chomataidh fhèin ag iarraidh.

Bha tòrr timcheall air an-sin gun teagamhach a bha cuideachad air.

Bha còrr is leth-chued ann an toiseachach a chàidh e suas gu fàisg air ceud aon bhliadhna. Thòiseach e a’ uair sin a’ tuiteach a-rithist – tha a’ air a bhithean is suas on uair sin.

Bhithinn a’ teagasg dannsa tro mheadhan na Gàidhlig aig an dachaigh bladhnaichean air ais mus do thòiseach dad oitigfeil. Bhithinn a’ dannsa aig na gamaichean ‘s rudan mar sin agus ’s e airgead a bhiodh sin a faighinn mar dhaonn. Nuair a fhuar mi an cothrom, nuair a bha clann agam fhèin – nuair a thòiseach Feis Tir a Mhurain – tha mi smaointinn gu robh e a’ dol bha dh’Uibhist. Tha mi a’ chum a' bhiodh sinn a chuir fàs air ceud aon bhliadhna, bha mi gu math deònach an fhéin, nuair a bhùrrain dhomhsa a dholl leis a’ chluinn. Ach gu h-àraidh bha mi gu math deònach an fhéin a bhògh e math dhallbhais faighinn dhan fhéidir a bhith a laitheamh fhèin ag iarraidh, bha iad ag iarraidh nan CD’s.

Tha mi a’ creidsinn nuair a bha mi nam cho-òrdanaiche ‘s e dreach a bhith ann a h-àrchairth a bhà a bhith a’ déanamh cinnteach gun robh a h-àrchairth duine far am bu choir dhàibh a bhith ‘s gun robb sinn a’ déanamh mar a bha a chomataidh fhèin ag iarraidh.

Gàidhlig.

Tha mi a’ chòir dhaibh a bhith ‘s gun robh a h-uile duine far am a h-uile duine ga iarradh, bha iad ag iarraidh an fhéin ag iarraidh nan CD’s.

Tha mi a’ creiddinn nuair a bha mi nam cho-òrdanaiche ‘s e dreach a bhith ann a h-òrailth a bhà a bhith a’ déanamh cinnteach gun robh a h-òrailth duine far am bu choir dhàibh a bhith ‘s gun robb sinn a’ déanamh mar a bha a chomataidh fhèin ag iarraidh.
LENA MACLELLAN:
Former Fèis Tir a’ Mhurain
Co-ordinator
(English summary)
I became involved in the fèis through interest in the music and the songs, and particularly in Gaelic. I also wanted my own children to be educated in Gaelic, so I joined the committee. I was also working with CNAG at the time and I was a fèis co-coordinator through my work. This meant organising classes, tutors, accommodation, and timetables.

What makes Fèis Tir a’ Mhurain so special is that the Gaelic is so strong in it, and that the children are getting songs and music that belong to the area. We produced a tape and a book of the songs that belong to Uist. We wanted the participants to see what it meant to make a tape or CD, so that they might go on and make one themselves when they were older.

It has been difficult getting round to making a CD as everyone is working voluntarily and they are short of time and money.

The first year we had over 50 participants, which went up to almost 100 one year, but then it started falling again. There are various reasons for this, such as people being away on holiday at fèis time. Numbers went up again when we moved to the smaller schools, which means that the fèis is more in the community. Lionacleit was good for the facilities it offers, such as the theatre and swimming pool, but the smaller schools have something different to offer as people are more involved with them and you get more of a feeling of being at a fèis.

I enjoyed being involved in the fèis as I was interested in the music and song anyway, and had been teaching dancing from home before anything official started. My own children went to the fèis when they were old enough, I felt it was good for them to be around Gaelic, as there wasn’t much Gaelic at their school in Daliburgh. My daughter now teaches dancing at fèisean – step dancing that she picked up at Ceòlas, as well as Highland dancing and social dancing.

It is difficult to say what the position of Gaelic and music in South Uist would be had it not been for the fèis. There would be a gap, as some of the children wouldn’t have had much of either. I really appreciate how good our fèis is when I visit other fèisean. I feel very proud of what we have and I think that the fèis has benefitted Uist.

TÒMAS DÒMHNALLACH:
Cathraiche, Fèis Tir a’ Mhurain
On a chaidh an fhèis ann an Ulbhist a char a bhonn airson taic a thoirt dha na sgoiltean Gàidhlig, rinn iad suas aig an am gum biodh an teagasg air a dhèanamh tro mheadhan na Gàidhlig agus tha sinn air cumail ris an-sin tro na bladhanachan. Tha e air a bhith gu math duitich aig amannan a bhith a’ faighinn luchd-teagaisg a rì teagasg ann an Gàidhlig air a h-uile ionnstraimd a bhios. Sin an trioblaid a bhios againn a h-uile bliadhna – a’ faighinn luchd-teagaisg, Tha e a’ bas beagan nas fhasa a-nis tha mi a smaoineinn gu teagamh – tha barrachd ann aig a bheil Gàidhlig.
Recently we have been getting more and more participants from the mainland as we are one of the Gaelic-medium feisean.

**TOMMY MACDONALD:**

Chair, Feis Tire Mhurain

(English summary)

I first became involved in the feis by helping as a tutor for keyboard and accordion. People were very good at attending meetings in those days. The chairperson held meetings in his own house and he was very good at cooking and baking so there was always a good buffet! After a few years I was asked if I would be chairperson.

The most important subjects we do as far as language is concerned are singing and drama — everyone has to do one or the other. We also offer piping, whistle, accordion, keyboard, fiddle, art, games and stories, shinty and Highland dancing.

Recently we have been getting more and more participants from the mainland as we are one of the Gaelic-medium feisean. People come from places such as Aberdeen, Glasgow, Speyside, and Skye. Those who have left the island take their children back for the feis.
3: the nineties

Perhaps the most significant achievement of the féisean movement has been its success in actually growing and retaining expertise within the communities...

Donnie Munro, Northings, 2003

The 1990s were a productive period when around twenty-five féisean were established. In 1993 alone, six féisean initiatives began in the Argyll, Lochaber and Inverness areas. Factors which may have contributed to this expansion included support from Pròiseact nan Ealan which ran initial workshops in Mull and Arran, the growth of involvement in Gaelic-medium education, the HI Light Arts Project and increase of European funding to the Highlands and Islands. By 1994 there were 150 Gaelic playgroups and 48 Gaelic-medium units throughout Scotland. In the Highlands and Islands additional funding was available through the HI Light Arts Project. Run by the HIDB from 1990 to 1991, this project released an extra £250,000 for indigenous arts. The area received European Objective One funding from 1994-96 which, among other things, supported heritage, the arts and media. The Broadcasting Act of 1990 committed £8 million to the Gaelic Broadcasting Committee which led to a dramatic increase in Gaelic programming and the number of jobs in Gaelic radio and television. Nationally, two large scale Celtic Festivals sprang up: Celtic Connections in Glasgow in 1994, and the Hebridean Celtic Festival in 1996.

The first degree level course in traditional music in Scotland was founded in 1996 at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow. Prior to this course, the nearest place for the full-time study of traditional music had been Cork, in Ireland, which had supported arguments for tertiary levels of traditional music tuition in Scotland. Féisean nan Gàidheal's Director, Arthur Cormack, was a member of the panel which met to validate the new BA in Scottish Music, and several féis participants were granted a place in this first year.

Changes were taking place both locally and nationally which impacted on Gaelic and the arts in Scotland, including the reforming of the HIDB as Highlands and Islands Enterprise with a network of Local Enterprise Companies in 1991 and local government reorganisation in 1996. The re-establishment of a Scottish Parliament in 1998 made a positive contribution to the Gaelic language, arts and culture with their early plans for granting secure status for the language.
"S fhèarr cara’d ‘sa chuir na crùn ‘san sporan’ gu sònraichte ma tha sibh a’ ciallachadh feis a dhèanamh! Chuir sinne ann an Tiriodh mòran feum air sean chàirdean a bha am bad an aon gho nthoichi ann am Barraigh, agus fhuaire sinn eòlas air mòran chàirdean ura a thug deagh chohabh dhùinn nar ciad oidhirp feis a chur air bhonn leis a bhiodh freagarrach do mhuinntir Thiriodh fhèin, le dreach air Tirsideach air. Saol lithid mi gur e seo an feum a mhotha a ri feisean nan Gàidhleach – daoin a chràinneachadh gach cleas a thug ansaich mòran leis an t-òidhirp a bha am dìothraithe air an t-seachdain, Artair Dòmhnallach, agus Dòmhnallain lain Bràin a chaidh a ‘chomadeardh’ bhon a bhà a e a-staigh aig am na feise. Tha s ann a daoinn deug a bhith a’ cheumadhadh air a’ chomaidh a’ rithid, agus nach riutha sin a bha aig obair air a dh’oirithe, agus muinntir an ailein a thug an t-sìth na dèan bràth a bha dol againn air eideigin a chur air a h-ùile feasgar, m.e. coileadh muinntir Thiriodh fhèin, coileadh an luchd-teagaisg, coileadh an t-òidhirp sabhail (chuir an droch shìd don t-sabhail sìnt!), coileadh chloinne le Donnie MacLeòid, is dannsa. Rinn an t-Ollamh Mairead NicAoidh bho Sgoil Eòlas na h-Alba oraid riadh an t-seachraidh Thiriodh tro chèòl is bàrdachd agus cho cudromach ri ri’i sam bith, dh’fhàg sinn aon oidhche saor! Deagh ’pheadrent’.

Mas e feallsanachd féise crìdhean dhàoine thogail tro cheòl, dràma is dànadh an teis mheadhn na coimhearsnachd, thàinig sin gu buil anns an t-seachdain ud. Ach a bharrachd air an t-seachdain shònraichte sin, fréumaich na fheumhaichean a thà a air an cur sìos aig an an cothrom às fhathanna feadh an t-sabhal. An luib sin, tha clasaichd aise a doil a h-ùile feasgar Dhàine, tha an féis a’ toirt cuideachadh do dh’oiridh do ochd bliadhna, deug an clasaichean-aoidhche accordan agus a’deig. Tha a’ bhuidhean a thairig còmhla a sheinn aig Seirbhis na Fèise am beachd leantail ora, ’s bha aon bhùth-obrach againn is fheumhaichd ‘s fear eil fein eideigin dhùinn anns a’ Ghiblein.

Mura dèan fèis ri’ach gnothaichean car mar seo a thòir gu aire dhàoine, tha fhios gur fhìdhlean leantail air.’

**Fèis Thiriodh**
Isle of Tiree 1990

**Mas e feallsanachd féise crìdhean dhàoine thogail tro cheòl, dràma is dànadh an teis mheadhn na coimhearsnachd, thàinig sin gu buil anns an t-seachdain ud.**


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Mura dèan fèis ri’ach gnothaichean car mar seo a thòir gu aire dhàoine, tha fhios gur fhìdhlean leantail air.’
In Tiree we drew from the experiences of Feis Bharraigh to create a feis suitable to our needs.

I believe the greatest strength of a feis is to draw people together to share ideas and create an event which is suitable for a particular community. In addition to music classes, at the end of each day we had Gaelic games and drama and it was this activity which the children enjoyed most of all. With help from the committee and volunteers we were able to have a function each night for different age groups, including children, a dance, and a talk about the history of Tiree through song and poetry by Margaret MacKay of the School of Scottish Studies. If the primary aim of a feis is to lift people’s hearts through music, drama and dance then this feis succeeded.

I would like ideas to be developed to bridge the gap between Gaelic and non-Gaelic speakers so that it becomes naturally an integral part of the week... without the language people can never really have the culture.
Aon dòigh na h-òrain dhuine a bhith cudromach – tha i a' cheirt na Tire. I geneall, nil a’ Ghàidhlig aig a' brosnachadh Gàidhlig fad na fèise. Bu chòir dhuinne a bhith cudromach – tha i aig cridhe na Tire agus an fhèis a' dèanadh diofar. Aon Thunder is behind the week which has worked hard over the year with different people involved.

JOHN HOLLIDAY: Founder member

The feis in Barra seemed to have a good effect on the young people, allowing them to enjoy their culture, and giving a platform for people to reinvigorate their culture. This island has gained a lot from the feis. There is a burst of activity during feis week but it also gives a structure for longer-term development of traditional art forms, such as ceilidhs and classes, through the winter. The feis week gives people the energy to keep going throughout the year.

The main problem we have is the energy of the people involved. It is a small community and the same people have been there since the beginning. It is exhausting to keep up the same level of commitment and be motivated throughout the autumn. When we see the feis itself happening however, it makes us all want to stay involved.

I thought that Hamish Moore's idea of reintegrating song, dance, Gaelic and instrumental playing was a very good idea. I have tried to introduce some of these ideas in Tiree. Gaelic is an integral part of the feis, and in some ways Tiree is a Gaelic heartland, but at the same time the majority of the kids aren't native Gaelic speakers. It has been an uphill struggle to get the tutors and kids to speak Gaelic. I would like ideas to be developed to bridge the gap between Gaelic and non-Gaelic speakers so that it becomes an integral part of the week. The language is crucial to the culture, stories, singing and dancing. Without the language people can never really have the culture and more needs to be done to develop ways for children to use Gaelic within the arts.

In our end of week concert only the tutors take part, and there is a lot of debate over this. I think that the kids could do more. Most people however, think that there shouldn't be pressure on the tutors to produce stage performers as the feis is more relaxed without it.

The most we have had was a hundred and ten children – this was probably too many. Now we are back to about seventy to eighty. We also have adults in the classes: Six or seven years ago a quarter of the students were adults. We've been told that this isn't such a good idea anymore for child protection issues. I disagree with this as I think adult participation adds to the community nature of it. I feel that the kids benefit by seeing the community involved and seeing adults trying to learn the same things they are learning.

JESSIE GREY: Treasurer

I first went to a feis when I was in Tiree on holiday. I was so impressed that I went home and made a big cross-stitch picture of the feis. Another special memory for me is one year when Farquhar MacRae played and we danced a strip-the-willow on the pier as the sun came up. Many people come on holiday so they can attend the feis so it has an impact on holiday accommodation. It brings the community together too, because we hold events to fundraise, such as the tutors' ceilidh and a dance on the Friday night. Our feis merchandise brings in a lot of money without which we couldn't afford to have so many tutors. We have fifteen tutors this year which is quite a lot for a small island.

JOYCE GILLESPIE: Founder member

I have been a committee member since the first Feis Thiriodh and am a part-time music teacher in the school. I feel it is very important for the island to have the feis. There have been benefits to people from the island and to those who come to teach or participate. Feis Thiriodh does manage to keep teenagers interested right up until they leave the island.

There is always room for improvement and each year we try to offer something different. We listen to feedback from tutors and from islanders for new ideas. We're going to include an ensemble group at the end of the day for more able musicians to play together.

The main success of the feis is getting children to participate and enjoy the language and the music. We get a lot of support from musicians on the island. A good number of children get lessons in a range of instruments. Regular instrumental instruction is very important so it is always a loss if a tutor leaves the island. This year-long tuition and the feis cross-over well and one supports the other.

MYRA BROWN: Feis Thiriodh Merchandise Co-ordinator

I'm in charge of the feis merchandise which is one of our main fundraising projects. We sell feis products throughout feis week and have regular stalls at cattle shows, at Christmas and I sell it from the house all year round. Now we have everything from mugs and candles to sweatshirts for children and adults. Last year we made about £2,000 profit. I do this voluntarily and enjoy it as the quality of the merchandise is so good.
When I took over being in charge of merchandise seven or eight years ago we only really sold sweatshirts and t-shirts. As it was the same people coming back each year, I thought it would be nice to give them a wider choice. Now we have everything from mugs, candles, key rings, pens, fleeces and sweatshirts, with about ten different items for children and about twenty-five for adults. People come early in the week to buy fèis merchandise so they can get to choose from the new items; only about a third of the stock goes back to my house after the fèis, and we now also do mail order.

LISA MACKINNON:
Fèis Bheag Tutor

I work at the Fèis Bheag at Fèis Thiriodh, for younger children. I went to the first fèis in Barra when I was 4 years old, and I have been at a fèis every year since, either learning or tutoring. I remember how much I enjoyed the first fèis and how excited I was every morning waiting to go. The fèis was the highlight of my holidays.

Fèisean make communities work together, organising cèilidhs and dances. I got a lot out of it: a wealth of music and language, and songs that I will never forget. I don’t know who I would be without the songs, music and dancing, and I doubt that I would have experienced these things had it not been for the fèis.

When I was doing drama one year the tutor was from Harris, and the first line I had to say was ‘dè tha ceàrr?’ I had picked up his pronunciation, and my mother in the audience was laughing at me for saying ‘ceàrr’ like a Hearach!

I give up my own holidays to work at the fèis because I enjoy meeting people and feel it is important to keep the music and language alive.

MARTIN & DANIEL GILLESPIE:
Accordion Tutors, Fèis Thiriodh

When we were younger, the musicians coming to the island made a big impact on us – we all looked up to them and that made us more enthusiastic to learn. Our first year of teaching was in 2005, and we enjoyed being able to put something back into the fèis and teach kids what we’ve learned ourselves. It’s good for the kids to see people who have been through the fèis return to teach. In our view the quality of the musicians is the most important thing to keep the fèis successful.

Fèis Tìr an Eòrna
North Uist 1990

‘S aithne dhòmhsa clann air feadh Uibhist nach biodh fhios agam a bh’ ann mura b’ e obair nam fèisean — tòrr dhan chlann a thigeadh a-nuas a bhruadhinn rium agus ‘s dòcha nach aithnichinn iadsan; bidh iad ag ràdh ‘Oh yes, I was at a fèis two years ago — do you not remember?’ ‘S e rud uabhasach fhèin laghach a tha sin.
NANAC SKIVINGTON
Uibhist a Tuath

Thill mi a dh'Uibhist ann an 1972 agus tha mi air a bhith a’ fuireach an-seo on uair sin. Nuair a thill mi bha corre oideche ann dreach airson ceol traidiseanta ann on taigh-seinse Westford, ach a bharraichd air sin cha robh mòran a’ dol idir.

Thòisich mise an toiseach nuair a bha an nighean a b’-òige agam ochd bliadhna s’ bha cothrom aice a dhol gu féis. ’S ann an uair sin a thòisich mi a h-uile bliadhna is a bh’ ann air a bhith a’ cunnartach – agus a-nise chleasan mar sin – rudan putadh na cloiche agus tòrr agus spòrs traidiseanta mar againn an toiseach. Bha iomain dràma ‘s obair-ealain dràma ‘s seinn agus ’s dòcha gun robh pìobaireachd ‘s Tha mi a’ smaoineachadh gu mòr.

Traidiseanta ‘s chòrd sin rithe cursa Gàidhlig agus ceòl Beinn na Faoghla a’ dèanamh i bliadhna sa cholaiste ann am nuair a dh’ fhàg i an sgoil rinn an dà rud a b’ fheàrr leatha agus uair sin. ’S e seinn agus giotàr a dhà – tha corra bhliadhna on sàs ann. Tha i a-nisd fi  chead ‘s uairsin a thòisich mi fhèin an aice a dhol gu fèis. ’S ann an ochd bliadhna ‘s bha cothrom a bha an nighean a b’òige agam Thòisich mise an toiseach nuair mòran a’ dol idir.

Ach a bharrachd air sin cha robh taigh-seinnse Westford, ach ceòl traidiseanta ann dìreach airson sin. Nuair a thill mi bha corra a’ fuireach an-seo on uair 1972 agus tha mi air a bhith Thill mi a dh’Uibhist ann an Uibhist a Tuath.

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...without Fèis Tìr an Eòrna there wouldn’t be the same amount of music, and you just have to go to the concerts to see the wealth of talent.

NANAC SKIVINGTON:  
Former chairperson  
(English summary)
I was born and brought up in North Uist and returned to live on the island in 1972. There wasn’t much happening in the way of music then – there would be the odd night of folk music in one of the pubs but not many young people took an interest in traditional music.

Our féis started in 1990. The subjects we offered at first were piping, drama, singing, drumming, art, shinty and traditional sports. Traditional sports include shot-putt and hammer, and this is a good way for the féis to keep the older boys, as they like doing traditional sports and shinty.

It is so easy now to get from island to island and children came this year from Eriskay and Berneray and also children from the mainland. This year we had about 150.

The féis has greatly helped music in the area. We get a lot of support from the community – people always look forward to féis week and come to the concerts throughout the week.

The best thing I have seen at the féis was when a group of children went to Ceòl nam Fèis in Eden Court. This encouraged them and they still sing together, five years later. I know children all over Uist that I wouldn’t know were there if it wasn’t for the féis – sometimes children that I don’t even recognise come up to me and say ‘Oh yes, I was at a féis two years ago – do you not remember?’ That’s a tremendously kind thing.

ALISON MACINNES  
Chairperson  
& KATHLEEN MACLEOD:  
Secretary
The féis is a Gaelic féis and classes are taught in Gaelic most of the time. It can be difficult to actually teach music in Gaelic, but the music is traditional and singing and drama are in Gaelic. This year most of the tutors we had were young people who have gone through féisean themselves and who are now old enough to teach. Our féis runs from Monday to Friday; we have a tutors’ cèilidh on the Wednesday and a children’s concert on the Friday, which is the high point of the year.

As well as the cèilidhs in the evenings, we have a shinty match on the Thursday evening which involves tutors playing against children! We also have a shinty match on the Saturday, and Uist Camanachd has grown from the féis. It mainly involves people from North Uist, but now there are a few boys from South Uist who come as well. They’re mainly fifth and sixth year boys who run the training sessions themselves as they have gone on courses and qualified as coaches and have also raised money for strips.

The féis has made a big difference to traditional music in the area as it has grown and grown; there seems to have been a bit of a revival. The féisean have had a lot to do with this, as without Féis Tìr an Eòrna there wouldn’t be the same amount of music, and you just have to go to the concerts to see the wealth of talent.

Everyone on the committee has specific jobs such as booking the school or booking tutors, so it is a strong committee and the work is never left to one or two people. We get volunteers during féis week for supervising children and doing tuck-shops, but it would be nice to have a big committee with lots of enthusiastic parents to give new ideas. Parents do help though, by sending in raffle prizes and supporting cèilidhs throughout the year.

This year we recorded a CD at Lionacleit School featuring past and present féis participants and this was launched at the tutor’s cèilidh. Our Féisean nan Gàidheal support worker from Stornoway was involved in helping us with this project. Now that we’ve finished our CD, we’ve talked about doing a video as a joint project with Féis Tìr a’ Mhurain. Our development plan took us up to the production of the CD, and now we have to see what’s next.
The first time I came across the fèisean was through talking to Lawrence Jamieson, the community worker in Golspie. He was interested in the idea of a fèis in the area so I became involved in setting up Fèis Chataibh. There were only four or five fèisean then. At the time, I think there was a strong influence from musicians from the central belt, and without their support I don't think the fèisean would have developed so quickly, because there seemed to be a lack of instrumental musicians in the north and in the Western Isles. If you look at the lists of tutors in some of the early fèisean you see that quite a few came from central Scotland, often with strong associations with the TMSA (Traditional Music and Song Association of Scotland).

I saw the fèisean as a great opportunity to build a bridge between Gaelic and the TMSA, but I think it was difficult to do that because there was support for Gaelic initiatives rather than traditional music as such. I felt the outlook should be broader, as the root of around 75% of music in Scotland is Gaelic and it should have been part of a much wider view, looking at what goes on in Aberdeenshire or Fife. Maybe that's coming now, with 'Fest o' the Mids' for example. For me the original intention of the fèisean was to unite the islands and the mainland – it was about commonality of language and culture.

I think the fèisean are about developing self-expression, both individually and collectively, about people standing up and speaking out for themselves. I learned to play the fiddle by listening – my father was a violinist and taught me the conventional way of playing the violin. It wasn't until later that I took up playing the fiddle, which seemed much more about expression, and learning by listening and trying something out for yourself, rather than a more rigid approach of there being a right way or a wrong way to do something.

The first tutors’ workshop in Ullapool was important, and I remember the Fèisean nan Gàidheal meeting when the suggestion was put forward and someone asked, ‘and what should we charge people to come to this?’ I couldn’t believe it! However it happened, and
A lot of good things came out of Féis Chataibh; we did a lot of experimental stuff. We were the first féis to have tutors arrive on the Saturday and we spent all day on Sunday having a tutors’ workshop, which worked very well. I think other féisean picked up that idea, which helped to get the tutors involved and say ‘what are your ideas? What would you like to see? How can you make this work?’ Suzie Petrov came over from the USA as a tutor; I’d met her at Alasdair Fraser’s Valley of the Moon fiddle school in California where she was tutoring. She introduced things like an ‘in the round’ session with everyone in the féis each morning, doing Gaelic words and songs, and the concert was held the same way. Everyone sat in a circle and took part, and the parents came along to hear what the children had learned. The Golspie féis had a family atmosphere, and focused very much on creativity and sharing ideas.

KEN HOUSTON:
Treasurer, Féis Chataibh

Although I’m not a native speaker of Gaelic, I’m very keen on supporting it and seeing it move forward. I’ve been involved with the féis since 1997 as the treasurer. Having retired early I’ve had a lot of spare time, and over the past eight years I’ve done most of the background work in organising and developing the féis with the committee. About three years ago I became a board member of Féisean nan Gàidheal. My involvement came about because I wasn’t able to travel much and we wanted to do more for our kids. We noticed that they were both keen on music, and heard about the féis, which was well established by then.

Having a financial background, I became involved as treasurer and thought we could look at other projects and bring together some financial packages. In 2000 for example, as well as the main week, we raised £6,000 to set up our own instrument bank in Sutherland which continues to be actively used. We set up some autumn and winter follow-on classes which started off with a few pupils taking accordion and fiddle and last year there were over fifty youngsters attending different classes over the winter.

The influence of the early work and of the people who set up the féis in 1990 is very much alive today. It has changed slightly, but the model set up was so good that the core has remained the same and we’ve gone with it. Around ’97 or ’98, we had a natural turnover of people who were able to help, and it dipped. At one point during my second year, I went to an AGM and only four of us were there. Technically that wasn’t a quorum, so we should have wound it up and forgotten about it. But we didn’t do that. We just turned the constitution over, put it in a drawer and kept going.

We had support from the Community Education worker, Lawrence Jamieson, and
the fèis came into its next phase. It always had fifty or sixty participants and, as the fèis movement has grown throughout Scotland, our numbers have risen to around ninety participants every year. We therefore have a much bigger pool of parents to call upon and last year was the first time in my eight years that we had the right amount of people on the committee. Then we turned the constitution back over again, read it, re-wrote it, got it approved and carried on!

Travel is the biggest problem we have in bringing everything together. Most participants come from Sutherland and Caithness, although we also have kids from Aberdeen, Inverness and Glasgow, where families have a local connection. We’ve had people coming from as far away as South Africa and Florida, so we can claim to be an international fèis!

Sutherland is 2,000 square miles, with a population of only 12,000 people. In the early days the fèis was residential and kids stayed in school hostels, but the hostels closed in the late nineties. The following year we thought this could be the end of it, because we didn’t have anywhere to put people. In fact the fèis was so strong that we had just as many come along.

Another big challenge for us was that the east coast of Sutherland has so little Gaelic in the core schools and we have found it difficult to do all-Gaelic activities. Someone suggested doing Gaelic arts and crafts, and we can use that to introduce Gaelic culture very gently. That’s been the single biggest development in our main fèis week since we set it up and it’s very much been aimed at enhancing the Gaelic content of the fèis week.

Money has been an ongoing challenge for the fèis. We have to inform people that they have to pay a sum of money for professional tuition which is value for money. There’s no way we could generate the £11,000 it costs to run the fèis from fees. In 1991 we were trying to run the fèis on £5,700. The fèis now costs twice that much and incomes haven’t gone up by much in those years. Sixty or eighty people at a fund-raising concert just doesn’t make you money.

It always seems to be easy to get a project off the ground, money-wise. You can get funding that will take you through years one to three and then the money will dry up in year four. Without the strength and depth financially within the community, if the funding dries up mid-project where do you find the rest of the money in the future? I’m sure it’s the same in other communities throughout the Highlands. In terms of keeping the fèis running money is crucial. And without external support you can’t maintain the quality of tutors and activities.

The thing that helps the fèis most is Fèisean nan Gàidheal, with its support structure and its team of staff. It has made a huge difference in keeping the fèisean going. I think that it has taken some of the pressures off running a fèis because you can pick up the phone with your development worker and they can advise you. The fèisean probably wouldn’t exist without Fèisean nan Gàidheal.

We’re beginning to look at how we could strengthen and support Fèis Chataibh by getting a fèis support worker in place to work an average of two days a week. In development terms, we’ve proved there’s a demand for the fèis; we could consolidate what we’ve got, but I don’t think there’s scope for much more. For the fèis to move forward, it’s going to need paid support, which would take the pressure off the committee.

Back in the ’60s and ’70s, where I grew up in Golspie, the nearest place where you could get piping tuition was Dingwall, and in those days it wasn’t practical. So without the fèis you’d still be where you were thirty years ago. It’s about giving kids music and giving them the freedom to play. You can bring them in at all levels and they can have a go.

Perhaps the biggest development in my time was spending a year putting together the Fèis Chataibh Cèilidh T rail and that’s now been running for four years. It started off with the music workshops, building up skills to get young people to a level where they could benefit more from the fèis in the summer. Then the main week would bring them on further, so we introduced more groupwork. The aim of the ceilidh trail is that you give the kids an objective to work towards, which is a job over the summer playing music, and it...
The ceilidh trail
is the best thing
I have ever been
involved in, it’s
phenomenal.

JENNIFER PORT:
Feis Chataibh

As a musician, playing for one of
the most famous singers in
the world is something I have
always dreamt of. Therefore
you can imagine how excited I
was when I was asked to play at
Skibo Castle to entertain the
guests attending the wedding of
Madonna and Guy Ritchie,
and the christening of their
baby son, Rocco. One of the
hardest parts was keeping quiet
about my booking; I wanted to
tell everybody but was sworn
to secrecy. Security was tight
leading up to the christening:
everyone in my family wanted
to ‘carry my clàrsach’, but only
me and my mum and dad knew.
I played the same music I
would normally play for an event
and although I was nervous
at first, once I got going I
relaxed, despite the number of
celebrities who were listening
to me. Everyone was nice and
friendly, and Madonna stopped
to say hello to me. The wedding
ceremony was in private, but
afterwards myself and other
musicians entertained the new
Mr and Mrs Ritchie and their
guests. Seeing Madonna in her
wedding dress, and Rocco in
his christening gown was a real
privilege and I will remember it
for the rest of my life. I could
get used to entertaining the rich
and famous!

NICOLA MARSHALL:
Highland Development Officer,
Feisean nan Càidheal

I went to my very first feis when
I was in Primary 4 – I
was officially too young to go,
but both my parents were on
the original committee of Feis
Chataibh in Golspie, so I had
to go! I’d only just started to
play the accordion. The feis
was my first introduction to
Gaelic music and traditional
music. I was eight years old and
I remember really struggling in
the tin-whistle class. It was all a
bit overwhelming, really. Because
my Mum and Dad were helping
to run the feis, it became like an
annual summer holiday. Ceilidhs
in our house were great; I have
memories of the house being
full of musicians staying, lots of
memories of the house being
full of musicians staying, lots of
tunes and lots of crack going
on. I met lots of people – even
now friends will say, ‘You know
everybody!’ because of all the
people who came to the house
during the feis. I think that’s a
great thing; even from quite a
young age I was meeting people
and making friends with people
who came down from Bettyhill
or from Thurso, and finding
out that lots of people were
interested in the same thing – it
was a great discovery!

ADDIE HARPER:
Fiddler and Tutor

I’ve been involved in many
feisean, and in taking classes
throughout the year. The first
feis I was involved with was in
Golspie and I can remember
lots of car problems in the snow
getting there and back. This
would have been in the early
1990s. The Golspie feis has
grown a lot since then, with over
100 children a few years ago.

I feel it’s important to spend
time teaching at a feis; it’s good
for the children to learn a bit
of music. The chances were not
the same when I was younger,
and I think it’s good to give the
children something to do. They
go out and play at places such
as old folk’s homes, and can
maybe even earn a bit of money
if they play at dances. Through
things like this, the feisean
benefit the whole community.
Feis Eilean an Fhraoich
Isle of Lewis 1991

MARISA DHÖMHNALLACH:
A Stèidhich Feis Eilean an Fhraoich

Tha mi ag obair aigh Pròiseact nan Ealain, agus ’s e a’ chìd obair a rinn mi dhaibh Feis Eilean an Fhraoich a stèidheachadh. Bha mi an sàs ann an Chuicheadairean an Rudha agus bha sinn a’ coimhead airson rudan urcha a dheanadh sinn ann an àite dreach a bhith a’ dol dhan Mhòd, agus mar sin thòisich sinn a’ dol gu Feis Bharraigh.
Bha Calum MacGillean Eathain air fòrum neo-fhoirmeil – Ealain nan Eilean – a chur air bhon airson ceangalaichean eadar na h-eileanan a bhrosnachadh, agus ’s ann tro Ealain nan Eilean a thàinig Feis Eilean an Fhraoich. Nuair a bhiodh sinn a’ dol gu Feis Bharraigh bhiodh sinn a’ deanadh an show aca Oidhche Shathairne agus a’ dol gu na Geamaichean air Latha na Sàbaid, ged nac b’ urrainn dhùinn sin aiceachadh dha daoine air ais ann an Leòdhhas! Aon bhliadhna ge-tà, bha gaoth laidir ann, ’s mi nam shuidhe anns a’ mhàrachd. Bha eagol orm gun tuiteadh a’ mharachd agus gun bithinn air mo mharbhadh agus gum fàighheadh mò theaghlach fios mu dheidhinn na bha mi a’ deanadh air feasgar na Sàbaid ’s gum biodh iad air am àsachadh!
B’ e 1991 Bhliadhna na Gàidhlig anns na h-Eileanan an Iar. Bha 1,500 clann ann an sgòr Leanann Leòdhais a dh’fhaoadadh tighinn chun na fèiseanns na bliadhnaichean sin agus thug sinn muinntir Na hEanadh a-stech an toiseach cuideachd. Bha 300 clann ann ag a’ chìd bhliadhna agus thàinig sinn dhan cho-dhùinadh gur e cusan a’ bhrì ann. Bha sinn air beagan ionnachadh bho mhùirinn Bharraigh agus bha sinn cinnteach gu d’ fhàgairt gu biodh e ro chochail dhùinn a bhith a’ toirt dhaoinne dhan eilean agus a bhith pàigheadh airson àiteachan-fuirich agus siubhal dhailbhair. Mar sin bha sinn airson daoine bhon eilean fhein a long aig an robh na sgilean a bha sinn ag iarraidh. Bha sinn gu math fortanach air bha daoine mar Donnie ‘Leod’ MacLeod ann a bha air daoine a theagasc san àite mar thà. Bha dailheadasan agus ge-tà, leis gun robh cuid ann a bha a-mach a’ range’ Donnie leis gun robh iad air tòrr ionnachadh mar tha agus dh’fhèumadh sinn coimhead gu daoine a thoirt a-stech a theagasc cuideachd.
Dh’fhéumadh a h-uile duine Gàidhlig a dhèanamh – seinn neo dràma. Bha sinn cuideachd airson a’ choimhinsachd a tharraing a-staigh airson ‘s gum biodh daoine a’ faireachd a dhàin gur e an fhèis acasan a bhi’ ann agus gun roibh àite ann dhaith. Bheanchaidh sinn gun dèanadh sinn seo le mòthaichean a thoirt a-steach airson an bàidh a dhèanamh, agus rinn sinn rota airson a’ chidsin. A bharachd air na clasaichean bha uair a thèid de ’recreation’ aca aig deireadh an latha – dh’fhaoadh iad snàmh, ball-coise no dannsa a dheanadh a fhèis acasan a bh’ ann agus gun robh àite ann dhaith.

As dèidh dhùnna dhol timcheall nan clasaichean aig Féis Bharraigh thuig mi gun robh e cudromach dèanamh cinnteach gum buineadh an fhèis dhan choimhearsnachd air fad, agus gum biodh a h-uile duine a’ faireachd a bh’ fhuair sinn a’ cur rudeigin ris. Bha sinn an rud a bha cho taraingeach uisge dìreach a fhàdh a fhèis Bhàrrraigh aig an às.

Bha sinn airson ìomhaigh na fèise a thogail sa bhaile gus am biodh a h-uile duine ann an Steòrnabhagh mothachail gun robh rudeigin a’ tacairt agus rinn sinn caismeachd tron bhail le pìobairean, luchd-teagaig agus a’ chlann air fad.

Fhuair sinn barrachd airgid tro bhith a’ cur chèilidhean air doigh air an oideachd. Bha sinn airson gum faceadh daoine gun robh rudeigin a’ tacairt agus gum tigeadh daoine air bòrd.

Thug an fhèis cothrom do dhaoine ionnsrmandaidean ionnsachadh agus tha mi cinn-teach nam faighnicheadh tu do chuideigin a tha a’ chlìuch an-dìugh cáite an d’ fhuair iad cothrom ionnsrmandaid a thogail airson a’ chaid uair, gun canadh iad Féis Eilean an Fhrhoicho. A’ coimhead air adhart – bidh Féis Eilean an Fhrhoicho an urra ris na daoine a bhiós air a’ chomataidh aig an às agus feumadadh daoine bhith deònach a thoirt air adhart. Tha na fèisean cho cudromach an-dìugh ’s a bha iad a-nàm.

Cha robh mòran ann a thaobh ceal anns na scoilean ro na fèisean. Bhiodh clann ag ionnsachadh eòrain airson Mòdan ach, nam bheachd sa, bidh co-tharpaidean a’ dè misneachadh mòran dhen fheadhainn aig a bhail comasan an àite bhith gan toirt air adhart. Bhiodh, ’s dòcha, dreach dìthidh a-mach à clas a bhiodh an tachadh airson a dhol dhan Mhòd a sheirinn ach, ag na féisean bha an aon àite aig a h-uile duine ge bith dè cho comasach ’s a bha iad.

MARISA MACDONALD: Founder organiser (English Summary)
I work with Pròiseact nan Ealan, and my first job with them was to start up Féis Eilean an Fh rhoicho. Calum ‘Malky’ MacLean started the informal forum Ealan an Eilean to encourage links between islands. It was through this forum that Féis Eilean an Fhrhoicho began. This co-incided with 1991 Bhliadhna na Gàidhlig (The Year of Gaelic) in the Western Isles which was part of the HÍ DB Year of the Arts.

Our committee worked very closely with the schools and the council. There were 1,500 children in schools in Lewis and Harris eligible to attend the fèis in the first years. We ended up with 300 in the first year and came to the conclusion that this was too many; we decided to keep to about 200-230 children.

We had learnt from Féis Bharraigh that it was going to be too expensive to pay transport and accommodation for tutors to come to the island so we looked for local people with the skills we needed. We were very lucky as people such as Donnie ‘Leody’ had already...
been teaching in the area. After going round the classes at Fèis Bharraigh, I realised that it was important that a fèis belonged to the whole community and that everyone felt they were contributing to it. The sense of community is what was so appealing about Fèis Bharraigh. We wanted to raise the profile of Fèis Ùile an Fhraoich so that everyone in Stornoway would notice something was happening. To do this, we had a march through town with all the pipes, tutors and children.

The fèis gave people a chance to learn instruments, and I'm sure the sense of community is what was so appealing about Fèis Ùile an Fhraoich to it. The sense of community is so that everyone in Stornoway felt they were contributing.

I realised that it would be even more good if there were classes throughout the year. At the fèis would do even more good if there were classes throughout the year. 79

So much '../../../../../../journals/ai/2010/2010_05_03_0946_79.pdf'
the moment tutors run classes throughout the year themselves. There are more musicians in Lewis as a result of the fèisean. The community has also benefited from the fèis as it brings people together.

We hope that the fèis will continue to grow and diversify. It would be good if we could have fèisean for various age groups, for example older teenagers and adults.

DONNIE ‘LEODY’ MACLEOD:
Feis tutor

I became involved in the fèis in its first year when a tutor fell ill and have been involved every year since then. I was used to doing private tuition and found the fèisean quite difficult in that normally the children who came had never picked up an instrument before. I would have to teach them all how to perform something by the end of the week – it was quite a challenge. Now children come back year after year and even come for individual tuition afterwards. Without the fèisean a lot of the children would never have had a taste of Gaelic song, music and drama.

Before the fèisean there wasn’t a lot for young people who were interested in music. There were people taking private lessons in fiddle, in both traditional classical music. There tended to be more in the way of bagpipes being taught when I was younger. The melodeon was popular but tended to be taught more from father to son. There wasn’t much schooling in music. There would be music teachers in the schools but they had mainly percussion instruments, nothing like the banks of instruments schools have today. The children from the fèisean have pushed the schools into teaching music after getting a taste for it.

Every year there is a highlight – I always notice that there is someone in the class who will make the grade. For example, there was one girl in the first class I taught who is now my assistant tutor at the fèis. We are all supposed to teach in Gaelic if possible. Although I can’t do so myself, I would like to think that Gaelic is getting a boost from the fèis – especially through the drama and singing as children who don’t have Gaelic will pick up words. I insist on only teaching tunes of Gaelic songs.

One challenge is that in such a short period of time it is difficult to teach an instrument. It is not possible to teach children to read the music in a week so I have developed a system borrowed from the ‘tablature’ used for teaching the guitar – strings are shown under the printed music with numbers for placing the fingers. Using this system any child can play something by the end of the week. This system instills curiosity in the children about how the music works without the numbers which can carry on into private lessons. The children who go on to various tutors from the fèis have a working knowledge of whichever instrument they are playing.

Although I don’t speak Gaelic, I have been involved in Gaelic for many years. When I was a member of the Laxdale Concert Party in 1949 talent was unlimited, with powerful Gaelic singers in every village. Entertainment in the villages used to be more traditionally formed and spontaneous. There is more instrumental work on the island now and youngsters who can hold their own with professionals on the mainland. The singing tradition, however, has died away slightly.

Being involved in the fèis has definitely been worthwhile. The rewards, from my point of view, come with seeing children achieve something such as being able to play a tune by the end of the week. The children may go away and not bother with what they have learnt for a while but once they have had a taster they may go back to it in later years.

In future years I would like to see more support from the powers that be for the fèisean. Everything is very expensive today and the committees have to raise a lot of money to supplement grants. The situation may not improve if the authorities don’t give more help and appreciate the benefits of the fèis. I heard recently of a council official who tried to order 20 fiddles and 20 violins from a company not realising it was the same instrument!
Fèis Farr
Inverness-shire 1991
...to give Fèisean nan Gàidheal their credit, they are flexible and I think we are unique. I don’t know of any other fèis that has this format.

ALASDAIR FORBES:
Organiser

The fèis was originally called Fèis Srath Fharragaig. It started about fifteen years ago and ran in the usual format of a week each year. That was at the time when my children attended. But after a few years both the children and the organisers seemed to be losing interest. I was invited to join the committee and then found that I was left as the principal member. Obviously the recipe wasn’t proving to be suitable – it was time for a change.

So we reinvented the fèis. For the first year or two it moved between Farr and Stratherrick. We ran the proposed format past Fèisean nan Gàidheal explaining that it would be one night a month with short sessions running for forty-five minutes, inviting whole families along. The participants can choose to do one subject and move on to another session for another forty-five minutes. They can go to a less populated class first and then go onto the class they wanted originally in the second session, and it works.

It has been running for about ten years or more now and has evolved over the years. Originally, in the Farr School, there would be two sessions followed by tea around nine and then the tutors would do a concert. We try to keep it of a high standard so that the youngsters who have been scraping away at their fiddles can see what they can achieve at the end of it – something to aspire to. Some people just come along for the concert. It’s become a wee bit of established entertainment in the area. After that we have a dance with a caller so the youngsters and adults are learning a dance as well. Then we have a problem of getting people to go home!

From Drumnaglass down to Daviot there are 450 to 500 people in total. Between thirty to sixty people usually attend, of all ages, from a wide area between Stratherrick to Inverness. It was only until we got the focal point of the hall when we started rebuilding the community.

Rather than the parents hanging around waiting for their children we try to get them involved too – so we get some adults in a room learning to play the fiddle. We’re quite flexible and the set up works, so we go with it. The spread of the area and basically what I felt people were looking for evolved into this system. We want to keep it fresh. We don’t want youngsters thinking ‘It’s just the same as last year’ so we always do something different – maybe offer a different skill or change the format a little bit.

We offer fiddle at various levels, bodhrán, song, keyboard, a Gaelic class, step dance and more. And of course, there’s dancing at the end of the night. The amount of tutors depends on the level of demand. We try and get the tutors to double up on the subjects they teach. You’re very much thinking on your feet and it’s only when the participants are at classes that you can adapt to the demand and arrange things.

It was very demanding in the first few years. We didn’t comply in many ways with Fèisean nan Gàidheal...
Quite often I say the only rule we have in our fèis is that there are no rules.

Gàidheal’s expectations – I just ran it myself for the first couple of years. It was only until I went to the Fèisean nan Gàidheal AGM and realised everybody has committees that I thought we’d better get ourselves formalised here. Regulars and people who were loyal to the fèis were invited to join and we’ve got a good committee now. I’m always expecting a letter to tell us to fall into line now. I’m always expecting a monthly email to tell us to make sure and have a meeting that we go through what we’re meant to do. I think there’s a tendency not to do that. It’s nice to see how they’ve grown from that.

My eldest daughter, Heather, teaches the whistle in schools. My son, Gordon, is now a member of the Inverness Fèisean nan Gàidheal, one of the few regulars that are already going to the AGM and actually bringing their ideas to the table. We’ve had performances by our fèis band at our successful gala in August where about 600 people attended. It was very satisfying to see this.

If we reverted back to the week format I still don’t think it would work. I think I know the pulse of the people around here and it’s just not the sort of thing they would come to. In recognition of the fèis origins we kept its name. At our AGM this year we revised the constitution and called ourselves Fèis Farr so that people know that we operate out of Farr. So for the future that’s what we’ll be known as.

Farr is in Strath Nairn, and central to that strath is Farr which tends now to be where most people congregate. People here commute into Inverness to work. We have a new hall in Farr and that has provided a focal point for the community.

Through our new clubs and organisations the fèis has created the image of Farr as a vibrant, visually attractive place, accessible from Inverness. The hall has been very useful. When we designed it at the paper stage it was partly designed with the fèis in mind with a central auditorium and rooms all round.

I left the glen to go to London in 1973 where there were a large number of events on – enough to attend something every night. When I came back in 1984 I couldn’t believe the change in the community. The old hall had been sold off and changed into a house and what was needed to bring the community back together was a hall. The drive to get money for the hall and the fund raising activities brought people together, recreated a community and actually brought out the activists. Not those who were only going to pay lip-service, but those who would actually get out there and give time, money and effort. So we have a fairly vibrant community now with people who are willing to get out there and make things happen. A raffle is always held at the events in the hall where maybe £150-200 is raised for the fèis – that’s our biggest source of income.

Other things have developed out of the fèis, particularly step dancing. We’ve had special visits from step dance tutors. Those who are already going on to the fèis are passing on to others by word of mouth how good it is. We also try and get contact through the schools because there are always new children coming into the schools. If we can, we go along and demonstrate what fèis participants can achieve. I once got Blazin’ Fiddles to visit the local schools and do a wee performance. Also, Bruce MacGregor and Mary Ann Kennedy went along one time to do a performance. That brought out only one lad but he’s now a very, very good fiddler – so it’s all worth while.

In the future I would like to see more artists but I think every area wants that too. I think that we’ve got it working right at the moment. The future is about changing to suit what people want and not stagnate. If people are coming a distance and coming away from their TVs on a cold winter’s night, they’ve got to have something they want to come to, so you’ve got to keep it vibrant and interesting.

Quite often I say the only rule we have in our fèis is that there are no rules. If people want something we’ll try to make it available to them. People ask me, ‘What is the youngest age you’ll cater for?’ Well, almost as soon as they’re born we can provide a crèche service for them, if other members of the family want to come along.

The future of the fèis depends on keeping those that are interested involved by giving them more to do and holding on to the people we already have. We have a faithful band of tutors and the success of the fèis is down to them. So that’s what the fèis should be about – people meeting together and enjoying themselves. I think we’re achieving that at the fèis.

I attempted to record the last Gaelic speakers in the glen on video camera – the last of them are now gone. We moved back to the glen in 1984 and a year later the Gaelic unit opened in Farr. My daughter attended and eventually all of my children went. Between the Macleods, my own and my brothers’ children, 15 children attended. We didn’t promote it because we didn’t want to take kids away from the local school. But it got about that the Unit was good and successful and parents in the area were asking us about it. So much so, that Farr had the biggest representation from any other area and eventually the local authority had to replace the taxi service to the school with a bus.

It’s very satisfying to see the children having the language. The association with the language and the fèis meant that they understood what the fèis was all about. Now about half of the fèis participants have a Gaelic connection which has been very useful for the success of our fèis.
Fèis nan Garbh-Chríochan
Ardnamurchan, West Lochaber 1991

Fèis nan Garbh-Chríochan translates as the festival of the ‘Rough Bounds’, the geographical area which includes Ardnamurchan and Knoydart to the Small Isles and Glenfinnan. This fèis was set up in March 1991 following meetings by the community education worker, Margaret Mulholland, and musician Jim Hunter. A committee of volunteers was formed and the first fèis took place in July 1991.

Seventy-eight children aged 9-18 attended that first year with thirty in residential accommodation. Workshops were held over winter months in Acharacle, Strontian, Lochaline and Mallaig with adult workshop weekends in spring and autumn added later. Clarsach tuition was provided monthly with tutor Wendy Stewart, supported by the Clarsach Society.

MARGARET MULHOLLAND:
Community Learning and Development Officer (Gaelic), Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey

The fèis would never have got off the ground without the commitment and support of many fine people. It’s strange in some ways to think back so many positive developments have happened since then. In 1991 there was neither a Gaelic Unit nor a Croileagan in any part of Lochaber.

I had the pleasure of being West Lochaber’s first Community Education Worker, starting in post in July 1990. It was a temporary post funded by the HIDB and Highland Regional Council with a remit to initiate community education developments in what was then defined as a ‘fragile area’. Having spent five years working in Urban Aid projects in Glasgow and Renfrewshire, coming to West Lochaber and actually being paid to work in an area of such stunning scenery was fantastic!

Like any Community Worker starting in a new job, I spent the first few months getting a feel for the area, making contact with people, asking endless questions and just finding out as much as I could about the locality.

The most obvious issues in the area at the time were the chronic lack of affordable housing and a lack of jobs for young people. It was also clear however, that in the Ardnamurchan area the indigenous language and culture were in severe retreat. Many of the various committees in existence lacked involvement from the indigenous population – ‘They don’t get involved in anything’, said one incomer about the local people. Locals said they felt squeezed out. Despite this, this was still an area where Gaelic was spoken and which had a rich musical tradition.

I had heard about the feisean in Barra, Skye and Ross-shire and knew that they were generating an upsurge of interest and enthusiasm amongst young people for their own culture. I did not know exactly how...
they worked but thought they sounded like the kind of event which might lift the spirit of the community and hopefully give the indigenous culture a much needed boost.

A trip to Fèis an Earraigh gave me a much clearer picture of what was involved and convinced me that it could be done in the Ardnamurchan area. It was clear however, that there would be some very real difficulties. West Lochaber was made up of very scattered and varied communities with long distances between some of them. Neither were there any large obvious buildings to host such an event.

At that stage though, my main concern had to be how to generate interest in the idea. Naively I thought that this would be the easy part. I felt sure that when people heard about what a ‘fèis’ was they would be filled with enthusiasm!

I began making contact with various individuals, describing what a ‘fèis’ was, talking about the benefits to the community and asking them if they thought a fèis could work in this area.

The idea was met with polite scepticism! Looking back, it was probably a very natural response, as most people at the time had very little idea of what a fèis was and of course I was an unknown quantity too!

I remember attending a meeting of the local branch of An Comunn Gàidhealach in Strontian. I was positive there would be an interest there. I left very disappointed. The group was mainly elderly and although friendly, their spirits were very low with regard to the language and culture of the area. The overwhelming feeling was of despondency – it would not work here, there was nowhere to hold it, young people in this area were not interested in that sort of music anymore and Gaelic in the area was ‘finished’!

One lady did give me a good piece of advice though. ‘Go and speak to the younger ones’, she said.

I well remember driving home to Arisaig that night feeling sad and disappointed but also angry that such bleakness and pessimism had taken hold.

About this time my sister who had been tutoring at Fèis Bharraigh, told me that she had met another musician and tutor who was living in Lochaber, Jim Hunter, and that I should get in contact with him. When I phoned Jim he was delighted as he had been thinking of the very same idea – a fèis for West Lochaber! I arranged to go over to Locheilside where Jim and Val were staying at the time. It was an exciting meeting for me. They were both so enthusiastic and positive.

Having someone like Jim with his wide experience of the music world as well as his experience of tutoring at fèisean willing to take the lead in initiating the fèis was a piece of crucial good fortune. Jim knew lots of people in the area. We drew up a list of people to contact and over the next few months, between us, we tried to speak to as many as possible prior to holding a public meeting in Acharacle School.

It had taken about six months in total of sowing the fèis seeds before the public meeting actually took place. The purpose of the meeting was to describe what a fèis is, how it works and to try and kindle the interest and enthusiasm of people so that a steering group could be formed which would take the idea forward. I did not know how the meeting would go although I had every confidence that Jim’s enthusiasm would be infectious!

The eventual turn-out of around 30 people was bigger than anticipated with a good mix of people of varying ages and from different parts of the area.

It was a very good meeting – many difficult questions were asked and strong feelings were expressed about the Council failing to provide traditional music tuition in schools. Important points were made too, about the difficulties we would face in organising an event for children across such a scattered area and the lack of any suitable venue. Neither Jim nor I had the answers to many of the issues raised. We asked that people just give it a chance. By the end of the meeting we had a group of people willing to give it a shot!
I did not realise at that time just what a wonderful, committed, hard-working and dedicated group of people this would prove to be. What was clear though, was that the people who had come forward had the undisputed respect and confidence of their community.

In the months that followed the committee began to explore how we were going to tackle the project. It was felt that the fèis should be open to young people from all over the area: Mallaig, Glenfinnan, the Small Isles, down to Kilchoan and Lochaline. But how to get them all together when there was no large central building, little public transport and large distances between the small communities, was no mean challenge.

It was eventually agreed that the fèis would operate from three sites in Acharacle: the local Primary School, the Village Hall and Mingarry Hall. A Community Education mini-bus would run a shuttle service between the venues at the end of every choice. What a task! Bed and Breakfast accommodation was arranged in Acharacle and Salen for the young people who lived too far away to travel daily. All these establishments had to have supervisors and transport laid on to bring the young people back and forth. A boat had to be hired to bring the Eigg youngsters across to Glenuig!

Short breaks were organised at all the venues. Lunch took place in Acharacle School but the building was not big enough to accommodate everyone so two lunch shifts had to be organised. An ambitious programme of evening events was also arranged with more programming and transportation difficulties. The whole project was massive in its organisation in these early days!

In order for the fèis to work, many people were needed to help out in various ways. I think this was part of the reason why Fèis nan Garbh-Chröchan was such a successful community event. It was a large scale event taking place in a small village and the help of many people was required in order to make it happen. This involvement very much embedded the fèis in the community. Everyone who wanted to help out could do so in some way. It was a very exciting time – the build up to that first fèis.

Karen Maclisaac, the first fèis secretary without whose dedication and exceptional commitment the fèis could never have got off the ground, and myself worked very closely together that first year meeting regularly over cups of tea at Smirisary! Together we waded through funding application forms, pondered finances, broke down the planning of the event into manageable chunks, worked out accommodation implications, juggled the timetabling and endlessly discussed and talked through the requirements of the project.

In that year a large percentage of my work time went into ensuring the fèis foundations were laid and providing support to Karen and the committee. By year two my input was considerably less. By year three the fèis was up and away – independent, confident and experienced!

Fèis nan Garbh-Chröchan has grown, matured and evolved over the years since then and remains a community development I am very proud to have played a part in. It brought the cream of the Gaelic tradition to Acharacle in the form of tutors. The effect of having these tutors working with the young people was to inspire, encourage and motivate. They brought a lively and exciting experience of Gaelic language, song and music to the community. This sparked an interest amongst the youngsters in doing follow-up classes and workshops.

I think the fèis acted as a catalyst. It helped stimulate a belief within the community that they could make things happen. And most of all, I believe, the fèis spread a pride and confidence within the community in their own language and cultural traditions.

By 2004 the fèis moved from Acharacle to the new Ardnamurchan High School in Strontian which offers a wider range of accommodation and facilities. There are plans to rebuild Acharacle primary school and the fèis committee hopes to return there in the future.

You get a chance to play and learn with some of the best traditional musicians in Scotland. There is nowhere better to learn music.

Iain MacMaster, Fèis Participant
Aon bhliadhna bha mi a’ teagasg ann an Àth Tharracail agus bha seachd deug anns a’ chlas agam.

CATRIONA NIC AN
T-SAOIR:

Neach-cathrach, Feisean nan Gàidheal, 2003-2005

Tha mi a’ smoiseachadh gur ann cómhlá rí Feis nan Gàidheal a thòidich mi an toiseach: chaidh an nghean an ghné an am fhèin dhàn fheòs fhìn sin ann an 1993. Air an aon bhliadhna chaoidh sin gu Fèis Lochabair cuideachd. Sin a’ chidh bhiadhla a’ chur Kate Martin air doigh anns an sgòil anns a’ Chaol (Caol Lochabair). Bha mise ag an dama bhiadhla nuair a thug mi cuideachd dha Kate. Chaoidh mi air a’ chomataidh airson an da fhèis ghoird or deidh sin, nuair a bh’ a bhà ag obair anns na sgòilean. Bha mi eòlach air Kate bho Fèis air teaghlaich airson an dà fhèis ghoirid às a thug mi cuideachadh dha Kate.


Neach-cathrach, Feisean nan Gàidheal, 2003-2005

Aon bhliadhna bha mi a’ teagasg ann an Àth Tharracail agus bha seachd deug anns a’ chlas agam.

Aig an am bha mi ag obair ann an sgòil ìth Tharracail agus a’ fuireachd anns a’ Ghearastan agus, mar sin, bha mi an sàs anns ann a’ fhèis. Gu math luath thòiscinn sin air clasaichean a’ h-uile seachd, a bharrachd dhan an fhèis fhìn. Bha torr den luchd-ciùil a’ fuireachd san sòr mar Aonghas Grant, na Hendersons agus laing MacFarlane ’s bha iadsan deònach clasaichean a dhèanalbh dhùinn gach seachdain no gach cola-deug.

An clàr-ama againn air aiththerachadh agus tha sinna a’ deànaimh âite cinnteach dhan Gàidhlig, feumadh a h-uile duine rudeigin a dheànaimh sa Gàidhlig uaireigin san t-Seachadain. Tha an fhèis air tighinn air adhart aca na prìonnsabal againn annmar nan a bha iad. Tha an latha againn nas giorra a-rèidh – eadar 10 agus 3.30. Bha sinne mar chomataidh a’ cur seo air adhart ach le bhith a’ bruidhinn ris a’ chloinn agus ri luchd-teagaisg; bha iad ag ràdh rinn gum faodachd barrachd spòrs agus geamaichean a bhith ann tron latha – measgachadh math a dhìalaiseach agus rudan aotrom.

Tha a cheart cho doirbh luchd-teagaisg fhàighinn an-dìugh ’s bha e an uair sin agus tha barrachd feisean againn a-nise – gu math tric a’ rith aig an am nuair an do fir aisteach.

Cuideachd tha na riaghaitseàr gràmar Disclosure air dìulghasadh a dheànaimh dhùinn oir feumadh fios a bhith againn fada ron am có bhos a’ tighinn thuagain. Uaireannan, bith luchd-teagaisg gar leigeil sòs’s tha sin ga dheànaimh doibh do chomataidh a bhith a’ cur fèis air doigh. Ged a bhios clann ur a’ tighinn gach bladhna tha a’ chuid mhòr dhiubh air a bhith ann roimhe agus tha fios aca nuair a thug iad ciamar a tha sinna a’ deànaimh rudan ’s chan eil stiù bith againn. Tha iad airson tighinn; tha iadh aca ann an ceòl agus anns a’ chultar eil strì sam bith againn. Tha iad a’ dèanamh rudan ’s chan a bha iad a’ tighinn gach bliadhna do fir aisteach a b’ e gu math doirbh a eil ach ceithir ceòrbaichinn inntie. Tha e gu math doirbh bhith ag obair san sgòil chun eil eilte ann far an tìgh a’ chlanne uile cómhla airson bruidhinn riutha. Bhiodh marquee againn gach bladhna air raon-cluiche na sgòile. Sin far an biodh ann a’ cumail consart na clòinne, consart an luchd-teagaisg agus cinneideachd airson sam bith eile. Nam biodh uiseach tram ann bhiodh an t-usge b’ struthadh a-staigh air aon taobh dhen mharquee agus a-mach air an taobh as fhearr den chloinn. Airson na clòinne a tha nas oighe na 12 tha iad a’ tighinn dhan ard-sgoil, ’s tha iad a’ fhas eòlach air a’ òidh aig no gnothach a tha a’ cordaidh riutha. Bhith sinn a’ fuireachdann nuair a thug iad dhan árd-sgoil, mar sgìreanan, gum b iad eòlach air an sgòil mar thà ann an doigh eadar-dhealaichte, mar òidh coimeichnachd. Cuideachd, cuiridh iad eòlas air clòinn eile, le clann a’ tighinn dhan fhèis bho na seachd bwn-sgoilean sa Ghearastan.

Tha Feis nan Gàidheal-Chribhan steidhichte ann an Ìth Tharracail, sgre gu math spagthe. Tha i air a bhith ann an sgòil Ìth Tharracail gu bho chaon di dha bhiadhla agus ’s e sgòil for bheag a th’ inntie; chan eil eil chèitheadh seòrmaicheinn inntie. Tha e gu math doirbh bhith ag obair san sgòil chun eil eilte ann far an tìgh a’ chlanne uile cómhla airson bruidhinn riutha. Bhiodh marquee againn gach bladhna air raon-cluiche na sgòile. Sin far an biodh ann a’ cumail consart na clòinne, consart an luchd-teagaisg agus cinneideachd airson sam bith eile. Nam biodh uiseach tram ann bhiodh an t-usge b’ struthadh a-staigh air aon taobh dhen mharquee agus a-mach air an taobh as fhearr den chloinn. Airson na clòinne a tha nas oighe na 12 tha iad a’ tighinn dhan ard-sgoil, ’s tha iad a’ fhas eòlach air a’ òidh aig no gnothach a tha a’ cordaidh riutha. Bhith sinn a’ fuireachdann nuair a thug iad dhan árd-sgoil, mar sgìreanan, gum b iad eòlach air an sgòil mar thà ann an doigh eadar-dhealaichte, mar òidh coimeichnachd. Cuideachd, cuiridh iad eòlas air clòinn eile, le clann a’ tighinn dhan fhèis bho na seachd bwn-sgoilean sa Ghearastan.

Tha Feis nan Gàidheal-Chribhan steidhichte ann an Ìth Tharracail, sgre gu math spagthe. Tha i air a bhith ann an sgòil Ìth Tharracail gu bho chaon di dha bhiadhla agus ’s e sgòil for bheag a th’ inntie; chan eil eil chèitheadh seòrmaicheinn inntie. Tha e gu math doirbh bhith ag obair san sgòil chun eil eilte ann far an tìgh a’ chlanne uile cómhla airson bruidhinn riutha. Bhiodh marquee againn gach bladhna air raon-cluiche na sgòile. Sin far an biodh ann a’ cumail consart na clòinne, consart an luchd-teagaisg agus cinneideachd airson sam bith eile. Nam biodh uiseach tram ann bhiodh an t-usge b’ struthadh a-staigh air aon taobh dhen mharquee agus a-mach air an

3. Feis the nineties
taobh eile agus, nam biodh a’ ghaoth lásidir, bhiodh mòran fuaim ann. Nam biodh sìde mhatt ann bhiodh e fo mhath ge-tá. Bhiodh an luchd-teagaig a’ toirt a-mach na cloinne ’s ag obair a-muigh. ’S e sgre bhreagha a th’ ann far am faod thu a bhith a’ seinn ’s a’ cluiche a-muigh air na creagan.

Cuideachd, air sgnóth ’s gun robh an sgre cho sgnóth ’s gun robh clann a’ tighinn às a h-uile àite – à Chnòideart agus às na h-éileanan beaga mar Eige agus Eilean nam Muc – bhiodh iad a’ fuireach aig an fhéis ’s b’ fhéidir dhuinn daoine fhàighinn a bhiodh a’ coimhead às dèidh na cloinne. Cuideachd, b’ hfeudar dhuinn rudan a dhèanann leis a’ chloinn air an fhíasgar. A bharrachd air biadh a thoir dhathair air an latha bha sinn a’ deanainn biadh dhaibh air an fhíasgar cuideachd. Bha thu ag obair cha mhòr ceithir uairean fichead san latha. Dh’hfeumadadh cuideigin a bhith ann an comhnanaidh gus déanamh cinteach gan robh a h-uile sòn ceart gu leòr. Mar sin bha barrachd obair ann am Feis nan Garbh-Chriochan na Feis Lochabair.

Ann an Àth Tharracail bha e doirbh luchd-teagaig fhàighinn agus gu math tric ’s e luchd-teagaig a bhiodh a’ tighinn a-staigh ’s dh’hfeumadadh iad fuireach cuideachd. Bha e math air bhla luchd-teagaig uile còmhlach fad na seachdadh; bhiodh chlaidhean math aca agus bhiodh iad a’ cluich annsa na taighean-òsta.

Seach gun robh an tresa cuid dhen chloinn a’ fuireach bha e gu math na bu daoire Feis nan Garbh-Chriochan a chumail seach Feis Lochabair. Bhiodh faisg air ceud ann uaireannan agus bhiodh deich thar fheachad a’ fuireach ann an àiteachan fùirich. Bha e math dhan sgre air a’ sàileabh ’s gun robh an t-airgead a’ dol dhan sgre airson B&Bs agus dhan luchd-teagaig cuideachd.

O chionn bhliadhnaichean tha sinn air a bhith a’ taraing a-staigh clann nas oige, bho chòig gu ochn. Cha bhi sinn a’ toirt mòran taghadh dhaibh idir, bidh sinn dreach a’ cur prògraim air doigh dhaibh le ceol is seinn is cluiche ionnstràmaidean a h-uile latha. Tha a’ chloinn às òige eadar-dhealaiche – chan eil iad cho miseachail ris an fheadhainn as sine ’s tha e math a bhith gan toirt a-steach tráth airson ’s gum faic iad dè th’ anns an fhéis. Tha e cuideachd math dhaibh a bhith mun cuairt air a’ chloinn as sine – tha jad a’ faicinn nan sgilean a’ th’ aig a’ chloinn eile mar a tha iad a’ fhas nas sine ’s chi iad gum b’ urrainn dha na sgilean seo a bhith asa fhéin le ùine cuideachd. Tha e math gu bheil luchd-obrach nam fèisean a’ dòil a-staigh dha na sgìolaichte ag obair cómhla ri classaic, co-dhiù tha iad gan iarraidh guf nach eil, oir tha sin a’ leigeil le clann eile eòlas a chur air dhe tha a’ tachairt aig na fèisean.

Tha e math dhan luchd-teagaig a tha anns an sgre aig a bheil sgilean ciùil a bhith ag obair cúmhair ri oighrigdheachd ’s tha sin a’ toirt cothrom dhaibh sin a dhèanamh. M’ e muimhitr na sgre fhéin a tha ag obair cómhla
It is still as difficult to attract tutors as it was when we started. There are more ñeisean and they often take place at the same time.
CATRIONA MACINTYRE:
Former Chair, Fèisean nan Gàidheal
(English summary)
My involvement started with Fèis nan Garbh-Chriochan; my daughter took part in the fèis in 1992. We also went to Fèis Lochabair in that year. That was the first year of the latter. Kate Martin had organised it in Caol School. I helped her in the second year of the fèis and shortly afterwards I went on the committee of both fèisean. I remained involved because I believe in fèisean. I saw how great they are for children's self-esteem and for learning skills.

Gàidheal had an important place in those fèisean, maybe because so many who were involved spoke Gàidhlig. At the time I didn't think we had to speak Gaelic – it just happened naturally. The language, music and culture just complemented each other.

At the time I was working in Acharacle and living in Fort William and, as a result, I was involved in the fèisean in both places. Very quickly we started on weekly classes outwith the main fèis. There were so many good musicians living in the area – Aonghas Grant, the Hendersons and Iain MacFarlane for example – who were willing to take classes every week or every fortnight. Things have changed and now we give Gaelic a special place and everyone does something through the language during the fèis week. Both fèisean have progressed since their establishment but the fundamental principles remain the same.

It is still as difficult to attract tutors as it was when we started. There are more fèisean and they often take place at the same time. Also such things as disclosure checks add to the difficulties since we need to know a long time in advance which tutors are signed up for the fèis so that the necessary checks can be run.

The help we get from Fèisean nan Gàidheal makes a big difference. When we started first we felt isolated but now we derive confidence from the fact that this organisation is supporting us.

Fèis nan Garbh-Chriochan is held in Acharacle and involves a scattered community. It was held in the local school up until two years ago. It is a small school with only four rooms and difficult to work in. A marquee was set up on the playing ground and that's where we held the children's and tutors' concerts and other gatherings. If it rained heavily, water would stream in one side of the marquee and out the other. If it was windy there would be a lot of noise. In good weather it was great. Indeed a lot of the classes were held outside in good weather.

Because Fèis nan Garbh-Chriochan covered such a scattered area it attracted people from places like Knoydart and the Small Isles it was partially residential. This made it harder work than Fèis Lochabair since children had to be accommodated, they would have to be fed in the evenings and they had to be looked after. Similarly tutors generally had to be accommodated locally but this meant that we could have great ceilidhs in the evenings. The local economy also benefited through extra bed-nights for bed-and-breakfast establishments.

More recently we have been trying to attract more of the younger children aged from five to eight years. They do not get a wide choice, we just provide a programme of singing and instrument playing each day. They tend not to be as confident as the older ones but they do get a feel for what the fèis is all about. It is good that they are with the older children since they see that they have learned skills to which they can aspire.

I didn't do as much with Fèis nan Garbh-Chriochan as I was with Fèis Lochabair. I organised the latter but with the former I simply helped out so I didn't have the responsibility of making up lists and so forth.

When children work with tutors they develop a mutual respect for each other. Though the children might have seen tutors performing on television or at concerts in Eden Court or Glasgow, when they work with them they do so as friends. This relationship, where they work together as friends, has a great effect on children.

I have been on the board of Fèisean nan Gàidheal for four years and I would not be involved if I did not believe in their work and objectives. Fèisean nan Gàidheal has made great progress over the years and I hope this progress continues.
There was a meeting in Aviemore one night organised by Community Education. I wasn’t actually there but the following week I discovered I was going to be the chairperson! So that’s the first I knew of it. I don’t believe I said I wanted to be on the committee, I just said I was interested. I was assured that there wouldn’t be too much work involved – but there was a lot.

I think that was in the summer of 1991 and we were going to run a fèis in the first week of the October holidays that year. We had help from the Education Department in Aviemore. We didn’t do the paperwork because it was all done by Community Education. We put flyers out to the schools but we didn’t get any takers for that so I volunteered to go round to all the primary schools. I didn’t know much about what we were doing but I tried to make it sound very interesting. When we came back from the summer holidays we had about 65 or 70 names registered. We booked the Abernethy Christian Outdoor Centre for five days and we would have different people coming to teach. It was all very exciting.

I had never been to a fèis, I had only heard people say that they were great and I liked the idea. We had committee meetings to decide who was doing what. We were mostly worried there wouldn’t be enough children and we wouldn’t be able to pay the tutors. The committee wanted local tutors but found it quite difficult. We realised quickly that in order to secure tutors for the following fèis we would have to ask successful tutors then and there to come back the next year.

By the end of the week I was amazed at what the children had achieved. It was such a success and everyone was really excited by the end of it. I think we stayed in that venue for a couple of years and then decided we ought to give the other end of the Strath a chance and moved out to Loch Inch. There, in the afternoons, they had canoeing and biking and Judith Bullivant came to do night-time walks. It got to a stage after five years that there was more than enough work to do and we got ourselves a full-time administrator, Catherine Bingham. That’s when I bowed out because I felt, after five years, that I had done my bit.

The first fèis came at an interesting time for my family because my eldest boy wasn’t interested in music but then he got into playing the bodhrán. The fèis really inspired a lot of young people. There are many participants who are now professional musicians or still involved in music. A lot of participants have gone back to tutor at the féisean. So the féis was a catalyst. There were a lot of talented people. I would say that before we started the féis week most people were thinking, ‘This is never going to work’. But it was just amazing what the children learned.

I used to go to Fort William the week before the féis and get half a dozen clàrsaich from Mike Anderson and take them back the next week with a bottle of whisky – he was really good like that. We mostly borrowed things. We got the ‘boxes’ from Inverness. If the children had their own instruments they took them along.

There’s no question that the féisean have interested young people in music. I can speak because my own children have had so much out of the féis. I have to agree with the recent RSAMD report findings on the féisean. Two of my sons are in Back of the Moon. The drummer from Old Blind Dogs came through Fèis Spè. I’m proud of them.

I hope that the féisean can keep going with as much strength as they have been. Keeping something going is more
difficult than starting something. It’s a bit like learning a musical instrument – you make an immediate improvement, it’s easy. But keeping going is a really difficult thing and whatever they do, they must keep going.

DAVID TAYLOR: 
Committee Member

For me, music is for relaxation: I work as a History Teacher. I was doing group work with the kids before the fèis began. I was teaching piping, and had discovered a good fiddle player in first year. Iron Horse were running a one day workshop and I took some of the kids along to it, and we formed a band with small pipes, whistles and two fiddlers. We played a concert at Christmas, and Mhairi Hall heard it and asked if she could join in on the piano. We worked with local tutors and ran classes in first year. Iron Horse were running a one day workshop and we discovered a good fiddle player before the fèis began. I was doing group work with the kids and that was it. When the fèis started we had this week of teaching instruments, with no backup for 51 weeks, so we started a programme with local tutors and ran classes ourselves throughout the year.

The other thing we did was building a non-music element into the week. We always had outdoor activities and in the afternoon, kids would do water sports, rafting or orienteering, set up by the Centre where we held the fèis. So it wasn’t an intensive music thing. We had four music classes a day, but in the afternoon for two hours we had activities. That gave an opportunity to quite a few kids who were maybe not that into the music to have an introduction to traditional music and Gaelic, without it being 100% focused on music. Kids would love all these energetic things. It’s part of the culture of the area as well, involvement in the environment – for example somebody would do a night-time nature trail through the woods with the kids.

When we started the fèis in Speyside, there were no native speakers left in the area, and the Gaelic Medium Unit wasn’t there. That worried some people that we didn’t have a big Gaelic element in it. So we did Gaelic song and drama as options, and we felt that at least Gaelic music could be kept alive in the area even if the language had gone.

We brought in Gaelic-speaking tutors to supervise the kids at night, and we would have a programme of evening activities. It was an important point that tutors had the evenings off and didn’t have to supervise the kids.

We were able to keep some of the older teenagers; they carried on coming up to sixth year of High School, and would talk regretfully about ‘my last fèis’. We would allow the older ones to play in sessions with the tutors, that was their treat, in a way. They would say they didn’t want to be in a class with eight year olds doing one finger chords, so the other thing we did with the older ones was introduce master classes; tutors working one-to-one with more advanced players, that’s one thing that was a tremendous success though I don’t think that still happens. That took place in the afternoon session at the same time as the outdoor activities.

Marie Louise Napier was the person who really got the fèis off the ground, and Catherine Bingham, the organiser for a number of years, was tremendous to work with and did a great deal to keep the fèis going. We never had outside support from the Council or anything; that was part of the problem. Five young people from the fèis have gone into music professionally; Fraser Stone in the Old Blind Dogs; Ewan Robertson who plays in Breabach, Hamish and Findlay Napier who play with Back of the Moon and Mhairi Hall who is now teaching on the traditional music course in Benbecula and is a great piano player with a unique style. I remember she did her Advanced Higher History dissertation on the topic of Early Scottish Music, and produced a tape to go with it. She went on to Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Aberdeen University Celtic department then studied traditional music in Limerick as a post-grad degree.
The Ceòl nam Fèis concerts were a highlight for Feis Spé. In the second Ceòl nam Fèis, Mhairi Hall and Fraser Stone played piano and drums together, it was an unusual combination but everyone thought they were tremendous. The quality of music across those concerts was tremendous; you could have recorded a live CD from them. Maybe people didn’t realise the standard they were going to get. I knew the talents of our own kids, but hearing what was going on in other areas was astounding. I remember being jealous of Feis Rois organisation, the whole driving force. Feis Rois has always been the most dominant in terms of what it has achieved; there was no-one in this area driving the féis in the same way. The District Council gave Feis Rois great support, and you had people there driving music the whole time. We didn’t have that, we had people who were all voluntary. It’s worked tremendously successfully in that format, but you knew that it’s going to work; the other being the cost, its possible to make it cheaper if it’s non-residential. I’m disappointed in some ways that it’s gone non-residential, we had something with a unique quality that worked brilliantly, and we could take up to 80 residually.

For all of us, adults as well as children, the féis meant the chance to meet new people, have the benefit of different styles and ideas. We had lots of wonderful tutors over the years. What makes a good teacher? The ability to inspire kids, to make them desperate to play; desperate to learn; rushing back saying ‘I’ve got this to play; desperate to learn; thinking ‘I’ve got this to do’. There was somebody in the local hotels who had a session or a tune with the kids, to make them desperate to learn; desperate to experience music; desperate to learn; becoming a helper on the committee. I’m now involved in the féis from the very start in the nineties. The féis has made it cool to play traditional music.

The local arts organisation that Sandra Robertson has set up has made a huge impact on the area. Kingussie Arts Network supports music, drama and dance and puts on great concerts. The féis runs fairly regularly workshops now, and Jim Hunter comes over to take workshops. There’s still not enough money for traditional music in schools. We do have an instructor in Badenoch but it’s violin not traditional music.

Scottish children need Scottish music in the curriculum. When the local authorities appoint instructors they are still employing mainly classical musicians, so that the opportunities for traditional music through the school system are restricted. It’s the same with Scottish history; part of your identity and knowing who you are comes from that and if you don’t have an awareness of history, or literature, or music, then there’s something missing. The féis has supplied what the schools aren’t supplying. (That said, a music teacher from a traditional background recently started in Kingussie High School this Autumn, which clearly marks an exciting new development in traditional music for the area). The féis has made it cool to play traditional music. While our area isn’t thriving just as much as I would like it to, you can look at other areas in the Highlands and there’s fantastic things happening in Lochaber, Skye, Ross-shire; there’s some tremendous music going on. The féisean have done something incredible in achieving that.

The féisean have transformed the Highlands, the music was dying. When some of the kids come home from University now, they want to get together and play tunes; it’s something you don’t lose, you have it for life. Music is just one way into the culture; if there’s a story behind the tune, let’s know the story because that helps you know where you’re coming from. When I grew up learning piping in Dundee, I heard Jeannie Robertson singing MacCrimmon’s Lament, which was amazing. At University I heard Flora MacNeil’s first album Flora; it’s the greatest recording of Gaelic singing I’ve ever heard – it opened my mind. So many masses of different influences at young people, and they can decide what they want from there. There’s an amazing development going on in Scottish music just now, if you think back to when the Corries and Jimmy Shand was all we had. But underneath it was this massive amount that we didn’t know about and the féis has made that available, and cool for young people.

**Judith Bullivant & Elspeth Macgillivray:**

**Feis Development Worker and Chairperson (in conversation)**

**Judith:** My first involvement was as a Countryside Ranger doing an evening activity along Loch Insh. Little did I know what I was getting myself in for. I went along to the Friday night evening concert and thought, ‘This is really good.’ I started off as a volunteer, dragged in by Elspeth. I began my job as a part time development officer for Feis Spé in April 2005. Before that I was convenor for three years and secretary for a couple of years before that. When Elspeth asked me to get involved I was keen to see it running and see it going when my kids were old enough to be involved in it.

**Elspeth:** I’ve been involved in the féis from the very start in Abernethy in 1991. I started off being a helper on the committee and teaching piping – basically whatever needed done. I’m now chairperson for the second time round. Feis Spé covers the area from Dalwhinnie to Cromdale. It’s a very long thin strath, about an hour in travel from one end to the other. Originally we started up in Abernethy and we were a residential féis. The last couple of years weren’t...
residential so all the kids had to travel from both ends of the strath, last year to Kingussie and this year to Grantown.

Judith: Partly the feis became a victim of its own success. It’s very difficult to find a venue that can accommodate over 70 children, adults, supervisors and provide enough rooms for tuition. We needed about ten or twelve discrete spaces for instrumental tuition and a big space for everyone doing things together. So we had really outgrown the suitable venues and it was either limit the numbers, which was a shame if there were more and more children wanting to come to the feis, or go to a day feis. I think a lot of other feis run as day-feis and they seem to work pretty well so we thought we’d give it a try. We had a very similar number coming along. One of the down sides is that we lost some of the older children because they enjoyed the social aspect. But the committee agreed in the end that we were running a music festival and not a holiday camp. Some parents openly admitted that it was a good way to occupy the children for a week of the holidays. I think everyone got a lot out of it but some had been put there rather than because they wanted to be there.

Elspeth: Feis Spè worked fine and then we introduced a Feis Bheag for younger children alongside that as well. We’re sitting with about 65-70 participants, with 30-40 Feis Bheag kids who come along daily. In the beginning when we were up in Abernethy outdoor centre we only had about 50 children and five tutors. The five tutors were basically the five committee members. We got a lot of support from Community Education and that’s how we got going. At Loch Inch last year we had about 80 participants – that’s when we decided we had to move out.

Judith: The feis has been able to come in and offer a lot of instrumental tuition to children, either through the feis or through things we’ve done with the schools. We’ve started music clubs and we’ve got a céilidh band as well; there’s a lot of initiatives that have come on. It’s made children a lot more aware of what’s out there and made them think, ‘I want to do that’. It’s raised a lot of awareness.

Elspeth: We’ve done music clubs in Grantown on a Monday night and Kingussie and Aviemore on a Thursday night. These run weekly in blocks of six weeks. These are spin-offs from the feis. In 2001 we got funding from the Awards for All fund and were able to spend the money on different classes and more instruments. So we bought more guitars and did a dancing class, a Gaelic song class and a fiddle class. The instruments are now available for children to hire. It also gives children a chance to try out the instrument before the parents have to fork out a fair amount for instruments. We’ve also got the Feis Spè céilidh band now, which has sprung out from the feis with nine members who’ve been together for about eighteen months. It was funded by the Cairngorm National Park and Leaderplus. We’ve just received money to continue that for the next eighteen months and we’ve just put in an application for funding to do things as part of the Highland 2007 Year of Culture.

Judith: The idea was to give the older ones something to work towards and the experience of working together as a group. We’re trying to run it now as a winter céilidh trail unlike the other feis which happen over the summer. We already have gigs lined up from St Andrews Night to an old people’s home.

Elspeth: We’re thinking about doing a senior two-night feis in conjunction with the main feis next year. We did a senior feis about seven years ago with Iron Horse in Aviemore. Twenty to thirty kids attended but it took up too much of our time. So now we thought we would just run it in October with the main feis.

Judith: We’ve got Back of the Moon provisionally booked for February to do a senior feis for this financial year. Depending how that goes, we may run it alongside the main feis where we’ll try and draw everyone in together. What we hope to do now is alternate between Grantown and Kingussie. We put on a bus this year, as 35 out of 60 children travelled – I think that helped. We’re in a fairly healthy position at the moment. We had a dodgy time around 2001 when the feis had some funding for someone to do the administration work and then that funding ran out. I think that people suffer from volunteer fatigue at times because it’s always the same people that help out. Around that time feis nan Gàidheal conducted a survey into the number of voluntary hours put into the feis. I remember sitting down at a meeting and adding up the hours we spent on a voluntary basis. We frightened ourselves with the amount of hours we spent trying to keep the feis running.

Elspeth: We’ve been involved in the Youth Music Initiative (YMI) through the feis so all the schools and their staff know what the feis is and what we do. We’re in and out of schools all the time now and the kids see us as tutors running the feis and the staff support it.

Judith: During feis week we have a tutors’ céilidh and concert and the participants’ concert which together raise £400 and help to offset the running costs. The Feis Bheag is for 5 to 8 year olds and Feis nan Gàidheal will only fund from 8 year olds upwards, so that is self funding. I would like to think in the future that it will still be running and going from strength to strength. There are children coming into the feis who have younger brothers and sisters to influence and parents who may want to get involved.

Elspeth: We did Dannsa Spè last year with upwards of 60 kids at that, with one-off funding from the National Park. We did music and dance about the movement of the river Spey from Laggan to Cromdale. We used local tunes and songs played to a backdrop of specially commissioned photographs. That involved children from every school. It is really a local feis for children resident in Badenoch and Strathspey but we do get a few from elsewhere. I think that we are quite keen to develop links with other feis and get our kids to go to other feis. I’ve just compiled a list of travelling time and there’s never a week goes by without something happening. There’s a lot going on in the background that people don’t realise is happening. There is quite a lot going on, we’re never quiet.

There’s always this discussion about whether you play music for enjoyment or for the enjoyment of others.
Before the fèisean there was some singing in the schools but we didn't have instruments, and people wanted to make sure their culture didn't die out. Children from Harris were going to Fèis Eilean an Fhraoich in Stornoway, but 120
miles each day was too far, so we wanted to have a feis in Harris.

The committee was made up of parents at first. We started to raise money, and we got a lot of support from the community. We wrote to lots of clubs and groups, including Highland societies in Canada and America. The records show that we had £46 in February 1992, with almost £5,000 only a year later. We also made up a book of songs from Harris to raise money, called Chì mi’n Tìr.

We wanted to encourage local culture and customs at lunch times, and have activities such as baking oatcakes. We also have sports at lunch times — Finlay Calder who played rugby for Scotland took classes. Last year, 2004, we had sixty-seven children and fourteen in the nursery. The feis has encouraged musicians in Harris; some young people who started at the feis have gone on to play at dances and in groups.

Everyone in the community is willing to help with the feis in any way.

We were an independent group at first but are now part of Fèisean nan Gàidheal. We didn’t want the feis to be just the same as other feisean.

MAIRI CAMPBELL:
Organiser, Feis na Hearadh

The Feis takes place in July each year. I took over organising and coordinating it a couple of years ago. Our numbers are pretty steady at around 60 each year. They mostly come from Harris itself but some children do come from elsewhere for the feis. Children get tuition in such things as the chanter, fiddle, the box, drama and shinty.

Soon we are going to start a ‘feis club’ which will take place during the main feis week, but will be geared to giving Primary 1 and 2 children tasters of what is on offer. We did this at past feisean but only for one day. It worked well and in the future the ‘club’ will run for the whole week.

What was the traditional music situation in Harris before the feis was set up? Frankly, there wasn’t a situation.

CARISTIONA NICLEòID:

Chaidh an nighean agam dhan a’ chiad fhéis ann an Steòrnabhagh ach bha sinn den beachd gun robh sin ro fhada air falbh. Chòrd e gu mòr rium a bhith an sàs anns na feisean. Bha crach math againn leis an obair, bha comataidh mhath ann agus bha na tutors sgoinneil cuideachd. Tha dithis tutor againn fhathast bhon a’ chaid fhéis; Larry MacFhearghais a’ teagasan a’ fhèadan agus Lyn Nic ‘illeathain a’ teagasan dàirne.

Bha mi deònach a bhith ag obair gu saor-thoileach leis gun robh e a’ còrdadh rium agus nach robh trioblaidhean againg a-riamh leis a’ chloinn. Uaireannan air madainn Diluain cha robh duil agad gum biodh cuid den chlann ro sgilean neo talantach, ach air oidhche Haoine bha iad uile air an ard-ùrlar. Bha e furasta dhaibh rudan a’ thogail. Tha e cudromach gun tog a’ chlann beagan cùil is beagan Gàidhlig.

Tha an fhèis a’ toirt blàsaid den Chàidhligh do chlann aig nach eil Gàidhlig, Chan eil iad a’ deanamh mòran anns an sgoil le ùrinnstramaidean. Mar sin, as aonaidh a fhèis a bhiodh cùisean ro mhath a’ thaobh cùil. Chan ann as Na Hearadh a-mhin a tha na daoine a tha a’ fritheachad nam feisean a’ tiginn. Bidh clann air laithean-saora a’ dol ann cuideachd.
‘As a result of an initiative by local parents’ group, Comann nam Parant (Inbhir Nis) and Morag MacCallum, Gaelic Projects Worker with Community Education Service, fifty children from Gaelic medium units in Inverness, Tain and Newtonmore will be attending classes during their October school holiday. They will be participating in Fèis na h-Oige and will receive tuition in three musical instruments of their choice, and will take part in a five day programme of cultural and traditional activities, all of which will be conducted through the medium of Gaelic’.

Fèis Press release: 7th September 1992

MAIRI OAKLEY: Fèis organiser

I became aware of the fèis in 1992 when I was expecting my first daughter. At that time I was attending Gaelic classes and I used to take a retired doctor along. She had relations in Sgoil a’ Mheadhain (Central School) in Inverness and she was telling me about this wonderful event they were going to try called a fèis, which was going to take place in Culloden Academy for a week in October. The kids were going to be taking their sleeping bags, and learning traditional music, drama and games, all through the medium of Gaelic, which sounded like great fun.

Years later my daughter was attending Fèis Bheag at Feis nan Garbh-Chriochan when we went down to Granny’s on the summer holidays. I really wanted something to start in Inverness. By the time my daughter was old enough, Fèis na h-Oige was in abeyance. I think it was in 2000 when I met Arthur Cormack and asked him what we could do to re-establish a fèis in Inverness. We arranged a meeting with David Boag to come along to a Comunn nam Parant meeting. I got three or four interested people and we started from there.

It was much easier to re-start the fèis than we thought. At the time we were a bit concerned about the level of organisation involved, knowing that Fèis Nan Garbh-Chriochan was a huge undertaking. David suggested that we started in a small way with Saturday workshops. So that’s what we did, over three months.

The first resurrected fèis was held on the 28th of September 2000. Judith Peacock used to come up from Glasgow to Inverness on a fortnightly basis for clàrsach follow-on classes. When we resurrected the fèis the classes were still going on and Dave MacLennan, who I believe was instrumental in setting up the original fèis, had continued with the classes because they were very popular.

By the end of 2000, we had already done three workshops. We did the same for 2001 and then we thought ‘yes, we can do this’. We didn’t want to commit ourselves to a week-long fèis so we held a three-day fèis. For the last three or four years we’ve run a five day fèis. At one point I suggested we ran a two-week fèis but luckily I was shouted down on that one!

I think the very first workshop helped us to realise where we were going wrong. We were trying to please everybody and we wanted everyone involved. None of us had an eight year old – we all had much younger children so we wanted to try and introduce a Fèis Bheag as well. We had about 55 children, 6 tutors and another thirty younger kids. It was pretty overwhelming but we realised quickly that we shouldn’t run before we could walk and we...
decided to stick to working with the 8-18 age group and when we were a bit more confident, go back and try to provide activities for the younger age group.

One of the biggest changes we’ve had is in building up the pool of tutors. Initially we offered around five classes. It was a case of whoever could speak Gaelic and play an instrument or specialised in song or drama, then we were interested. We were very conscious of the commitment made by the tutors because it was a Gaelic feis. There are a lot of Gaelic speakers now; many who came through the feis movement and attended Gaieic medium education are now at the stage of tutoring, and there are others who have become confident in using Gaelic in a Feis setting. As a result we can offer a lot more subjects. We now have 12 subjects with a regular core group of 35-40 who are keen to be part of Feis na h-Oige and they’re not there because their parents want them to be there.

The feis runs in the first week in July for five days. We’re trying to establish the feis in that first week of the holidays. We didn’t go for a residential feis, because it’s quite difficult to find accommodation in the city. What we find is that if kids come along with their families, friendships are formed. So if they come back from other areas, as they get older they may come and stay with families here. I would like to see us have some sort of residential facility though. We’re looking at that for the teenage group who don’t see Feis na h-Oige as being so cool for them. We’re starting to offer residential weekends for High School kids and they’ve been successful. Part of that success was due to them staying in a hotel overnight, so I think that’s the way forward for us to attract the teenagers.

We try to have an arranged event at lunchtime – craft activities or games played through the medium of Gaelic. They can play outside or there’s a room where they can socialise. We want to make sure there are other activities, especially for kids who come from other areas and who might not know the local kids. What we tend to find is that by the end of the week everyone is outside together and friendships are formed that way. I’m sure it’s not easy for kids, particularly on their own and getting to know other kids, so at least when we have a semi-organised activity it’s a lot easier for them to get involved.

For the first couple of years, because we were running on a tight budget, we were relying on volunteers and parents to come along and supervise the kids during the feis. That was fine, except that a lot of the parents with the best will in the world would try to speak Gaelic, but didn’t have very much. So what we’ve done with the main feis is employ Gaelic speaking supervisors as the front line of the feis to speak Gaelic to the kids the whole time. The younger kids see that it’s cool to speak Gaelic, because they see young supervisors speaking the language and I think it’s got a real spin-off effect.

Already I think that we’re starting to mould some of the participants. Some of the older teenagers want to stay at the feis in the hope that they will come back as supervisors. In fact our percussion tutor Debbie MacKay was at the first Feis na h-Oige back in 1992. We certainly wouldn’t preclude having feis participants as tutors. We’re keen for participants from other Feisean to come and use their Gaelic at the Feis.

I think the confidence that the participants gain from the feis is really important. The feis gives children an extra dimension. Children have begun to realise that there are options and that traditional music is trendy. Also it keeps them off the streets; it gives them an interest that they wouldn’t otherwise have. It doesn’t make it so daunting when they have to go into different places because, through Gaelic medium education and the feis, it gives them a real confidence and self-esteem: confidence to relate to other people and in their own ability. I’m a great believer in the feis in that there’s nothing...
competitive about it and that everyone has a chance. Not everyone wants to compete and I think the feis, unlike the Mòd, is a healthy way for allowing the traditions to be upheld and to develop an interest in what’s going on. I think it gives the participants a sense of identity.

I would like to see the feis accessible to everyone and not just families that can afford it. Although for most of us, with the subsidies the fèisean are very affordable, I’m becoming aware of the fact that that’s not the case for everybody and it should be more inclusive.

I would like to see us having a much bigger programme of events for teenagers. Also, I’d like to look at getting families much more involved. Seeing the feis as being a platform for those who need that extra push to decide that yes, they are going to use Gaelic after all, and the capability of the feis in helping them to maintain or to get that interest in Gaelic.

We’re in the position where we are very keen to get an ‘annualised hours’ worker, but we haven’t had the time to decide what that worker would do. When we get that worker it would mean that there would be someone to keep the pot boiling all the time. What I wouldn’t like to see is the feis being run differently. I think that local committees and their autonomy are very important and they give you skills you can use in getting work. I do it because I believe in it and it’s helped me to get to know a lot of likeminded people. I feel the feis is very much contributing to sustaining a culture. It helps me to get involved in a way that I wasn’t previously. I am contributing with my feis colleagues to keep the traditions alive. At the end of the day I enjoy it, the kids enjoy it and I really believe in it.

**Feis Arainn**

Isle of Arran 1993

I remember the buzz around the school that week. Never was motivation so tangible in this or any other school.

**ALAN KELLY:**

Committee Member

The first Feis Arainn was held in June 1993 in Arran High School. I remember clearly the ‘taster’ sessions, held several weeks before the feis. This was a roaring success! Room 28 – my room – was used for this event. All day I was royally entertained. Into the school came Mairi MacInnes and Donal Boyle (fiddle) and Mairi took the lead. Each period, a different group filled the room. Some were bemused, some were sceptical and some were enthusiastic. By the end of each fifty-five minute time slot, the room was filled with newly converted feis enthusiasts.

I particularly remember my then fourth year class, as many of the girls spoke no Gaelic and I was intrigued to see how readily they took to Gaelic singing. I still have a golden glowing memory of them giving ‘Alasdair Mhic…etc’ laldy. I remember the buzz around the school that week. Never was motivation so tangible in this or any other school.

The pupils learned so much that week about Gaelic and about themselves. So many hitherto unrealised talents came to the fore in those five days. The school was criticised by some for taking this bold step. The reporting of the local press was less than enthusiastic, choosing to ignore the facts: basically schools deal in learning, and during that week there was more learning going on than in many other schools in Scotland.

In 1997 there was another Feis Week in Arran High School, but unfortunately the advent of ‘Higher Still’ and the continuation of exams into the second week of June have put paid to any possibility of a repeat of those weeks of activity and learning. Schools nowadays are so busy assessing that they sometimes forget they should be educating – in the widest sense of the word!

**AILEEN MCLAUGHLIN:**

Feis Administrator

The first two feisean in Arran took place in 1993 and 1997 and involved the whole of the
High School – around 300 pupils! In 1998, a number of the original committee got a few more people together and decided on a new format: namely a four-day féis in the last week of July. This was targeted at primary aged pupils and in 1999 we had around 60, a figure which has risen steadily to over 90 in 2004. Most participants are island children, although we always have a number of visitors, either friends or relatives of locals or those who have heard of Féis Arainn, and come to Arran especially for the féis. This year we had for the first time two brothers and another girl who have grandparents on the island and who attend a Gaelic medium primary school on the mainland. This was a welcome development for us and made a great impression on our youngsters. We do also get some High School participants but many of that age group get summer jobs on the island and we lose out on them after a bit. There is great enthusiasm among the youngsters and we hope the committee can continue to find the energy to match this!
KATIE ADAM: Chairperson of Fèis a’ Bhaile and Fèisean nan Gàidheal

(English Summary)

My involvement began eleven years ago when my children attended the fèis. I enjoy helping out and was asked to join the committee, and I’m still here eleven years on. The fèis is now more successful than ever, thanks to earned experience and having the assistance of a paid administrator.

2005 was the thirteenth Fèis a’ Bhaile, with 72 children attending. The number has risen over the years with far more participants speaking Gaelic. We are working on bringing more Gaelic into the fèisean in order to show that Gaelic is one of the integral parts of the fèisean, together with music and fun. The children really enjoy it, with participants coming from as far as the nineties.
as Aberdeen and Skye. Although there hasn’t been much change over the years, we try to do something new every year. This year we had music group work and we’re always trying to develop Gaelic. We also hear about initiatives which work at other feisean and try them out ourselves. It would be good to develop a Ceilidh Trail.

We have a drama group working with Feis na h-Òige and a group from Central School, Inverness. They came together for a play; Taigh Mairi Anna (Mairi Anna’s House). We’re trying to get funding for a learners group. We didn’t want to do any follow-on classes as there is a lot happening in the city and in the schools. We’ve been in Charleston Academy since the féis began, running during the day only. We still try to offer opportunities to work together. We have a whole-féis song which the kids learn. That’s when the older ones hide from me! It’s good to come together at the end of the week for the song.

We all have full time jobs and we don’t have much time for development. The four féisean in the area however, have come together to try to get a full-time development officer in place, in order to see through the developments we would like to put in place. Although the féis is only for a week in the year, you work almost all year on such things as instrument loans and attending many meetings. We therefore have to plan the féis at the start of the New Year. We all enjoy it and get a lot out of it ourselves too.

You don’t want to make everything mechanical, you have to approach the féis with open eyes to keep everything fresh. We could write a book on how to run a successful féis. In a way our book is already written!

The Islay féis was first established in 1993 and ran for around six years after which it didn’t take place for a number of years, reinforcing the concern that it can be hard work for volunteers to sustain the organisation and funding of these féisean over a long period of time. This extract from Fèisean nan Gàidheal’s newsletter Fàileas in 1994 describes the first féis:

**Sixty-five children from Islay and Jura attended the first Feis Òigrigh Ìle in their school half-term week to learn skills in traditional music, dance and Gaelic song and drama, concluding with an evening concert by the pupils and tutors. There were also evening classes for adults run in tandem, using the same tutors. This year the féis was in the village hall in the centre of the island, but some of the sound proofing between rooms and different areas was not ideal and one class was in the kitchen. It is hoped that a school may be available for future years.**

**DÒMHNALL ANGAIDH MACILLINNEIN:**
Manaidsear, Ionad Chaluim Chille Ìle (ICCI)
Tha mise nam Mhanaidsear aig Ionad Chaluim Chille Ìle (ICCI).
Chuir an t-ionad an fhèis air doigh an-uiridh agus tha sinn an dochas gum bi barrachd a’ tighinn chun na h-ath thè a chumail am bliadhna (2006). Cha do ghabh an fhèis àite bho chionn còig bliadhna gus an uiridh, agus ’s e Ionad Chaluim Chille Ìle le taic bho Christine Nic an t-Saoir aig Feisean nan Gàidheal, a chuir air doigh i.
It is important that this island is recognised as a place where traditional music is played by a new generation, by young people who are confident of their roots in the island.

Bhid an fhéis a’ tachairt tro sheachdain saor-làthainn gu sgoilean sa Ghearrann aig Ionad Chaluim Chille Ìle, faigh air Bogh Mòr B’ abhaist dhan fhéis a bhith a’ gabhail aite san ardsoigl mus deach ICCI fosgladh ann an 2002. Am biadhnha, bha clasaichean againn ann an seinn Gàidhlig, a fhidheal, an giotar agus am feadan.

Bha 17 againn a’ gabhail pàirt thairis air an dà latha dhèin fhéis am bliadhna. Bhid i a’ tachairt thairis air cóig làthadh nuair a bhios tòrr phàrant is clann an às inne sin ar ardsoigl. ’S ann air Dìdaòain agus Dìhaoinne a chaidh a cumail anùnridh le ceithir buidhnean-obrach gach latha is cuirm-ciùil poblach leis an luchd-teagaig is a’ chlòinn a air a chumail oíche ‘Haoine.

Ghabhadh barrachd dhaonain a thaladh dhan fhéis, gun teagamh – tha 24 sgoilearan san aonad Ghàidhlig aig Bunsgoil Bogh Mòr agus mu 300 san ardsoigl. Tha Feis Òigridh Ìle an dràsta a’ feuchainn ri comataidh ‘Haoine. Tha 17 againn a’ gabhail pàirt ri thaladh a’ chlòinn a air a chumail an-ùr a chruthachadh. Bhid a’ chomataidh ùr a’ beachdachadh air doighean far am faodar barrachd clòinne a thaladh chun na Fèise.

Còmhla ri Fèisean nan Gàidheal chuir ICCI clasaichean ciùil air doigh. Bha Friseal Seathach agus lain Stiùbhart a’ teagasg giotar agus an fheidh ann na cóig bunsgoiltean ann an Ìle is Dùr a’ bhàis airson deich seachdainean a’ leantainn suas gu Feis Òighridh Ìle 2005 agus an dràsta tha clasaichean air an fhidhleadh gus tòiseachadh a bhios a’ leantainn fad a’ gheamhradh. Tha na buidhnean-obrach air a bhith gu math soirbheachail leis cho math ’s a bha an luchd-teagaig. Tha tòrr spòrs air a bhith a ghiol agus a’ chlòinn agus na h-inbhidh cómhla agus chòrd an cuimh-ciùil poblach rutha gu mòr lem pàrantan is ann teaghalcian uile a an làthadh gan coimhead.

’S an dhillaghasd bu mhotha a bh’ aig an fhéis gu do staid i fad cóig bliadhnaichean air ais ruair a leag a chomataidh air dhùth an dreuchd as dèidh fad chloinn aca fhèin eirigh suas is an sgoll Ònaidh. Tha an dhillaghasd sé a’ tachairt tric le buidhnean coimhearsnachd, gu h-àraidh le buidhnean Gàidhlig, nuair nach eil daoine ùr a deonach dìleas dhan ghabhail air comataidh gus an obair a chumail a’ dol.

Tha an fhéis cudromach ann a bhith a’ toirt cothroman ionnscaidh dhan óighridh ann an ceol traideanta, oir chan eil seo idir làdir ann an lèir dhàsta. Tha seo a’ crochadh gu mòr air na sgleann ‘s an udeidh a th’ aig munntir an eilean fhèin ann an ceol eile, mar eismealer, tha còmhla braos gus mòr soirbhseachail san ardsoigl an-dràsta. Mar sin, tha an fhéis a’ toghail misneachadh na clòinne agus a’ bhosnachadh gseillean ciùil traideanta am measg na h-òighridh.

Tha taic air a bhith ann bho na pàrantan gu ruige seo agus bidh a’ chomataidh ùr a’ beachdachadh air doighean anns an faodar tuilleadh airgid air toghail anns a chomataidhean na clòinne agus na gheobhadh gus fheumail a bh’ aig an luchd-teagaig. Tha an fhéis a’ cluicheas ann am peile agus a’ toghail misneachadh a bh’ aig an luchd-teagaig.

Tha 17 againn a’ gabhail pàirt anns an bhaith anns an fhéis. Tha 17 againn a’ gabhail pàirt anns an bhaith anns an fhéis. Tha 17 againn a’ gabhail pàirt anns an bhaith anns an fhéis. Tha 17 againn a’ gabhail pàirt anns an bhaith anns an fhéis.
Fèis Lochabair
Lochaber 1993

One of my lasting memories of that fèis was seeing the Divisional Education Officer Joe McCabe, a guitar teacher himself, sitting in with the children in Davy Steele’s guitar class, beaming from ear to ear as he learned new songs and chords from his great hero.

KATE MARTIN:
Former Community Education Officer, Lochaber

I moved to Fort William early in 1992 as team leader for Community Education in Lochaber after finishing a secondment with the HIDB, now Highlands and Islands Enterprise. Having supported several féisean through the HI Light project, I was interested to see what was happening in terms of young people and music in Lochaber. Fèis nan Garbh-Chróchan had started the year before and was having fantastic success due to the commitment of the local community supported by community worker Margaret Mulholland and musician, Jim Hunter. It wasn’t in my mind to start another féis – the standard of music in Fort William was already very high – with Aonghas Grant teaching fiddle, the dynamic Lochaber Junior Pipe Band and several young people in the area already demonstrating superb skills in playing traditional instruments, including Malcolm Stitt, Ingrid and Allan Henderson and Iain MacFarlane.

I was based in Lochaber High School which at that time took in young people from all over Lochaber. I couldn’t help thinking how great it would be for more young people to have the opportunity to know about their own culture and to have an opportunity to learn Gaelic in an informal setting. I had been working with Councillor Michael Foxley and John Storey, CNAG’s Gaelic Development Officer in setting up the Lochaber Gaelic Development Group. We devised a ten-year plan for Gaelic Development in the area. Ideas about a Fort William based féis were discussed as part of that.

Meanwhile, while working with the Arts Project I had got to know Peter Westwater, Benny MacDonald, Eddie and Rosemary Hunter who ran an organisation called Lochaber Live which brought live music to the area. Through the HI Light project they had organised a traditional music festival at Old Inverlochy Castle, based on the Ballyshannon Festival in Donegal. Peter, Benny and Eddie had an interest in starting a féis, to give the young people who came to the festival a chance to develop music skills themselves. Fèis nan Garbh-Chróchan also drew participants from throughout Lochaber, so the group decided to call the féis after their own organisation, Lochaber Live, which then became ‘Lochabair Bheò’. I agreed to do the administration through Community Education, helped with funding applications and a constitution, and we formed a committee.

The first féis was held at Easter 1993 in Caol Youth Centre, a building run by Community Education. We had great cooperation from the head teacher of the adjoining Caol Primary School in allowing us to use classrooms. I remember the meals were a bit more difficult. Although we had willing helpers to prepare food for the children, someone had to be employed and on hand before we were allowed to use the kitchen. Red tape, don’t you just love it!
One of my lasting memories of that fèis was seeing the Divisional Education Officer Joe McCabe, a guitar teacher himself, sitting in with the children in Davy Steele’s guitar class, beaming from ear to ear as he learned new songs and chords from his great hero. Sadly, Davy died at a young age some years later, and is still greatly missed. He was such a powerful and yet sensitive musician and a brilliant, very funny storyteller. From that fèis I remember realising how good he was with children too – patient, kind and supportive in his encouragement of young learners.

Another memory was the tutors’ concert at Glenfinnan Hotel which was musically outstanding, – a once in a lifetime experience. I had to drive the mini-bus back to Fort William that night and had the task of interrupting a session with some of the country’s top musicians: Davy Steele, Wendy Stewart, Ishbel MacAskill, Andy Thorburn, Fred Morrison, Shooglenifty’s Angus Grant and Iain MacFarlane, in order to get them home to teach the next day. Stopping band members of Ceolbeg, Shooglenifty and Blazin’ Fiddles from playing tunes together? It wasn’t easy!

After the first year, a meeting was held to see if other people would be interested in helping. This got a very positive response. Gaelic teacher, Catriona MacIntyre and CNAG officer, John Storey together with local parents formed the committee, with Lawrence Young, then Headteacher in Upper Achintore in Fort William, and a keen fiddler, as Chairman. We decided to ask Aonghas Grant snr. to be Honorary President, because of his international standard of fiddle playing and teaching. If you ever see a fiddler with a red tassel hanging from their fiddle, this is the badge of competence awarded by Aonghas to his students!

The fèis continued the following year and took off from there with great local support, and when I left the area in 1994 I knew it was in very safe hands.

BENNY MACDONALD:
Lochaber Live – founder member, Fèis Lochabair

My first recollection of being involved with starting up Feis Lochabair is how we raised some funds for the first year. As a local group we had been active in organising concerts and festivals for about four years and Kate felt there was an obvious link with what we were doing and the fèisean.

The fèis continued the following year and took off from there with great local support, and a younger audience. He also suggested that they donate the ticket money towards funding workshops in traditional music. Initially the boys weren’t convinced about this, but went ahead anyway. It was easy to get word out around the schools and there was a great turnout, probably many of the children went on to attend the first fèis. So, to give credit where it’s due, Wolfstone should feel they had a big input into how music is now taught in the area. This one event helped Lochaber Live make a financial contribution which matched all the other funding Kate worked hard to access from the Leader Project, Lochaber Limited and Lochaber District Council. Having worked at other fèisean she was also a great help in choosing a suitable venue. With all that in place organising the first fèis wasn’t too much different from all the other events we were involved with. Looking back over that period there was lots going on musically and we were familiar with many touring musicians so they were easy to contact. They put in a great amount of work with the children during the day but were still playing back at the hotel each evening.

The most important thing about Fèisean nan Gàidheal is that it has once again made the Gaelic language and culture a very natural and acceptable part of a child’s upbringing in the Highlands and Islands. This is its greatest achievement.
A few weeks after a very successful feis the community was shocked to hear of the sudden death of Jack Stitt, a highly respected local musician who took a great interest in the feis and taught accordion. He passed on his musical interests to his children long before teaching was available through the feisean and at various times they accompanied him in his band. The name Stitt is well known in the world of traditional music as Jack’s youngest son, Malcolm, has gone on to become an accomplished professional musician, playing with bands like Deaf Shepherd and the Battlefield Band, and is now a member of Boys of the Lough.

Jack was so highly thought of that, later in the year, several local musicians organised a concert as a tribute to him. Jack’s wife, Mary, kindly donated the proceeds from the evening’s entertainment to the feis. At that time, several people were coming together to form a good strong committee and this was much appreciated as it gave sound financial stability for the next several years.

MARION MACDONALD: Secretary

The feis is usually held in the first week of the Easter holidays in Lochaber High School with classes for 8-16 year olds. We also have a feis for 5-8 year olds. Usually around 80 children attend the main feis with between forty and fifty 5-8 year olds attending in the morning only. The participants come from all the primary schools in the area – seven main schools in all, and also from outlying areas.

We employ particular tutors who can work well with the 5-8 year olds. We used to have them in classes in the afternoon but we found that the mornings work better, just after the older ones go off to class. It helps them to get into the routine of the feis and it encourages them to come along to the main feis when they’re older.

On the Wednesday night in the High School we have a tuition concert and a family dance. We teach the children dancing in a slot called ‘tutor-led activities’, so by Wednesday they all know the dances. We get a big turn out with whole families coming along. The participant’s concert is now on a Friday afternoon when all the parents come along to listen to what all the participants have learned.

Last year was the first year of the Ceilidh Trail, organised by Ingrid Henderson and Toni Russell. This year they visited places like Glenfinnan, Knoydart and performed on the cruise to Loch Shiel. They finished the last week of the trail by going to Barra. In the last few years the feis has grown, thanks to our development worker, Ingrid. It’s thanks to her that we have the likes of the Ceilidh Trail.

I think the feis gives so many opportunities to young people. My son is just back from Canada, having visited Celtic Colors through his involvement in the Ceilidh Trail. That wouldn’t have happened if it wasn’t for the feis movement.

The feis allows the children to try new things. We usually have a ‘come and try’ session on a Thursday, so the kids get a chance to try a new instrument and perhaps play it the following year.

I enjoy being involved in the feis. It is a lot of hard work but you feel as though the children are getting a lot out of it and it’s good to see their development. It makes you feel good because you’ve helped organise the feis and see them progressing. I think that the feis gives so many people opportunities. Feisean nan Gaidheal is very supportive of each of the local feisean and is a great organisation to be involved with.

KIRSTEEN MUNRO:
Fort William, Student on the Traditional Music Course, Stow College

I started learning the fiddle in primary school and had lessons from Aonghas Grant for a few years. I went to Feis Lochabair between Primary 7 and second year in High School. It was really good meeting new people who were playing the same kind of music as you. The feis was a better place to learn because it was more relaxed. People were at different stages so you didn’t feel pressurised because you weren’t at the same level, but you also wanted to be better when you heard people at higher levels than you.

Music is something I’ve always enjoyed. I would really like to pursue a career in music. I think it’s harder now because the talent has got much better and there are a lot more people competing to get on traditional music courses, but it makes you want to be even better, to get to that higher standard of playing. I’m now studying traditional music at Stow College in Glasgow. I think the feisean did influence me because the tutors were so encouraging. You saw that they were in bands, and what you could achieve by playing the way they were playing. It’s like a goal – you want to be just as good as the tutor and keep on improving every year.

LOCHABER CEILIDH TRAIL, 2004

This is the first year of a project which allows teenagers the opportunity to train and then work as professional touring musicians for the summer. After an intensive training period the three-week tour of Lochaber began with a support gig in Strontian with the Battlefield Band. Since then the gigs have been a mixture of formal concerts, sessions and dances in a variety of venues: village halls, community centres, inns, boats and even ‘big sheds’! The idea is to give the musicians a real taste of how it is to be a professional traditional musician today; the versatility in gigs, the constant travelling, setting up an area for concerts, presenting material to your audience and so on. Gigs in this last leg include Inverie (Knoydart), the Isle of Eigg and the Island of Muck, so rather than planes, trains and automobiles, we will be using trains, boats and Landrovers! We are even hiring a high speed rib boat from Mallaig so we will be the fastest band in the West Coast! In total the mileage covered by the time we end the Trail will be nearly 1,000 road miles, with Kinlochleven, Kilchoan and Inverie being the furthest points apart. The performers are getting to visit some beautiful places they wouldn’t normally get to and, in turn, these areas are getting the chance to access good, affordable traditional music.

Ingrid Henderson, Northings, 2004
DR MAIRI MACARTHUR:
Extract from Fàileas, 1994
‘B’ i a’ chèilidh sgoil-oidhche ar n-athraichean agus b’e sin deagh sgoil, anns am faighte ceòl is sùgradh, tôimhseachain agus seann eachdraidh’. This quote from a radio talk by a native of Iona in the 1930s describes the cèilidh as his forefather’s night-school, ‘where you got music, mirth, riddle and ancient history’.

Something of the same idea was behind our decision to include oral history and tradition in the programme for Fèis Mhuile which began last year – that it was good to remind ourselves that history and music making used to be fully part of every day life and work. They were not separate subjects to be learned at school or in special classes. We wanted to link the feis clearly into Mull’s own rich musical and historical heritage and so the workshops and accompanying small exhibition used quotes, taped extracts and pictures of singers, bards, storytellers of the area, both past and present. Fèis Mhuile lasts over a long weekend and involves adults as well as children. The two workshops and the Cearcall Gàidhlig (an informal cèilidh) were outside of the main tuition and were open to participants and to local people. Among the topics covered were how song and story can reflect historical or local events; the role of historical songs, rhymes and proverbs; how and where people learned musical instruments; where and when people danced and how tradition and music were passed on within the community. In future we hope to link this oral history with some drama workshop activity, so that local legend or anecdote might be acted out. It would be good to do some pre- or post-feis work with the island schools, linking in with art or local history projects. We did have the advantage of the recent Mull Oral History Project in which I had been involved, so it was relatively easy to draw together materials. But many areas have a local history society, Comunn Eachdraidh or museum through which ideas, material or leaders might be identified. Although I believe Mull is the only feis at present with activities of this kind, the support worker was especially useful in providing tutor contact details, and securing grants from various sources. By 2004, Christine MacIntyre, Fèisean support worker reported: ‘A great deal of change has taken place within the Fèis Mhuile committee over the course of 2003-04. In previous years the feis has been concentrated in and around Bunessan in the southern part of the island. Given the sprawling geography of the island, this meant that the northern part of the island had very little involvement with the feis. This was further compounded with the fact that young people from north and south rarely met, as at secondary level they were schooled in Tobermory and Oban respectively. With the help of additional funds from the Scottish Arts Council National Lottery fund, the committee were for the first time able to contemplate island-wide provision. This was initiated with a series of Gaelic song workshops in schools across the island and, over the coming year, it is hoped that the variety of disciplines on offer can be expanded. This will be enhanced with a main feis which is scheduled to take place in February next year’. 

Fèis Mhuile
Isle of Mull 1993

This quote from a radio talk by a native of Iona in the 1930s describes the cèilidh as his forefather’s night-school, ‘where you got music, mirth, riddle and ancient history’.

the nineties
As the crofters had taken over ownership and control of the Assynt Estate, there was a movement locally to develop the area culturally as well. Many of the children in the area had been going to Fèis Chataibh, which is quite a distance from Lochinver, where Fèis Asainte was based. So there was a need to do something more local, although it never developed into a full week-long féis. The group held three years of weekend events and a series of workshops throughout the year. In 1998 the féis was cancelled because of lack of numbers, and has been in abeyance since then. Fiddle workshops still take place in the area, and interested local children now go to Fèis Air an Oir or Fèis Chataibh.

**Fèis Latharna**

Oban 1994

Ma tha rud prìseil againn mar sin feumar a thoir dhan chloinn agus ùidh na cloinne a thogail ann.

**MÀIRI NIC FHIONGHAIN:**

*Neach-tacsa aig Fèis Latharna anns an Òban*

Tha mi a’ smaointinn gu bheil obair nam féisean a’ tòirt dhuinn cultar agus dualchas a bhùineas dhan sgèir às a bheil sins. Ann an latha a th’ ann, tha clann air an togail le cultar Ameireaganach, a’ coimhead rudan air teithbhisean agus sin na rudan ris a bheil iad a’ deànamh dlùth cheangal. Ma tha rud prìseil againn mar sin feumar a thoir dhan chloinn agus ùidh na cloinne a thogail ann.

Tha mi a’ smaoineachadh gur e sin an rud a tha na féisean air a dhéanamh airson ceòl. Tha ceòl agus rudan mar sin a’ dol anns na ghoiltean ach tha e gu math structured agus foirmeil, ach tha spòrs ’s fealla-dha agus saorlàithean a’ tighinn a-staigh an làb an fhacal ‘féis’ agus sin an rud a tha a’ còrdadh ris a’ chloinn, tha mise a’ smaointinn.

Bha mi air a’ bhuidheann-stùiridh a thòisich Fèis Latharna oir bha mì a’ faireachdadh gu robh clann à fhàrr dh’ a’ dol’ gu na féisean a bha sin anns na h-eileanan agus carsonach bu chois an aon rud a bhith againn ann an-seo? Ged a bhà clann a’ faighinn beagan cùil anns an sgoil cha robh ceangal Gàidhealach sam bith anns na ghoiltean aig an am sin ann an ceòl. Ann an Òban, bha buidheann againn a’ smaointinn gum b’ urrainn dh’huinn feachann ri féis a’ chur air doigh agus sin a thachair agus tha e air soirbheachadh cho math. Tha a’ chlairn a’ déanamh iomnstràmaidean ’s dràma ’s mar sin a’ chealidh le Gàidhlig mar phàirt dè dheòrth ciudeachd.

Tha mise a’ smaointinn, ma tha thu dol a ràdh gur e féis a th’ ann ràch urrainn dhuin a’ dhéanamh gu a’ Ghàidhlig, Ma tha thu dol a dh’fhàgail a’ Ghàidhlig às, dè th’ ann ach féis chìul de sheòrsa sam bith a dh’fhaoadadh tu faighinn ann am baile sam bith ann an Alba? Tha còir is deich bliadhna ann on a thòisich air a Ghàidhlig mar phàirt dheth cuideachd. Ma tha thu dol a’ chòrdadh a-Ghàidhlig às a bh’ ann ann an Alba? Tha còrr is deich bliadhna ann on a thòisich air a Ghàidhlig mar phàirt dheth cuideachd.

Ma tha thu dol a ràdh gur e féis a th’ ann ràch urrainn dhuin a’ dhéanamh gu a’ Ghàidhlig, Ma tha thu dol a dh’fhàgail a’ Ghàidhlig às, dè th’ ann ach féis chìul de sheòrsa sam bith a dh’fhaoadadh tu faighinn ann am baile sam bith ann an Alba? Tha còrr is deich bliadhna ann on a thòisich air a Ghàidhlig mar phàirt dheth cuideachd.
I might never have found out that my children had musical skills if it hadn’t been for them going to féisean. It has changed the lives of my children...

Maire Mackinnon:
Feis supporter (English Summary)

Although I don’t remember much of the first fèis, I do remember how happy my children were to be amongst other children doing things such as drama, singing and dancing.

A fèis gives people a culture that belongs to their area, in a world where children are being brought up in an American culture.

The community is important in the fèis. At the first concert they put on, the hall was full with parents and relatives, giving the children a chance to show people what they got out of the week. I might never have found out that my children had musical skills if it hadn’t been for them going to fèisean. It has changed the lives of my children, through the music, and other things connected to the fèisean such as singing and dancing.

The committee members are volunteers, and this is commonplace in the Gaelic world. People volunteer because they see that there is a need for what they are doing and that there isn’t the money to pay people. The Gaelic culture and language deserves more money and support.

Without the fèisean, children might sit inside and watch television throughout their holidays and not meet other children or make the most of the wealth of music and singing in the communities. Féisean help people make new connections with the communities in the islands. People leave the islands for work, but they still want to keep their culture and pass it on to their children.

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Fèis Dhùn Èideann
Edinburgh 1995

KEITH GRAHAM:
Fèis Administrator

A group of parents whose children attended the Gaelic-medium primary school in Tollcross (some of whom had attended fèisean elsewhere) thought the Gaelic culture provided by a fèis would complement the education the children received at school and formed a committee, together with others from the Gaelic community in Edinburgh. Jessie Newton, one of the principal founders was elected (and remains) chairperson of the committee and has been a driving force behind Fèis Dhùn Èideann and its development.

Fèis Dhùn Èideann continues to be run by a voluntary committee and is currently aimed at young people aged 5 -18, offering high quality music tuition and access to the Gaelic performing arts in Edinburgh. Gaelic culture is at the heart of all fèis activities and strong links are maintained with Tollcross Primary Gaelic-medium Unit and the wider Edinburgh Gaelic-speaking community.

The first event was a three day fèis which was held in Tollcross Primary School in 1995. It had grown so much by 1998 that a new venue was required. The annual main fèis is now a four-day tuition festival held in James Gillespie’s High School in the February holiday week each year.

In 1996, in response to demand from participants, Fèis Dhùn Èideann began providing follow-up classes in addition to the main fèis in February. Various clarsach groups meet as part of the Saturday classes and have represented the fèis at events throughout Edinburgh and beyond. They have included the opening of the Scottish Parliament, the opening of the new wing at Edinburgh Airport, an event at the Signet Library for the WS Society and the opening of a new wing at the National Gallery. They have also performed for Radio Scotland, taken part in the National Mòd and performed at the successful Cèol nam Fèis concert in Dingwall, where the junior stepdancing squad also performed to great acclaim!

With a view to both fundraising and profile raising, groups from the fèis play at the Meadows Festival and the Edinburgh Festival Fringe each year. Fèis Dhùn Èideann also holds an annual fundraising ceilidh – ‘Fèis Fling’ – as part of the City of Edinburgh Council’s ‘Cèilidh Culture’ initiative with a ceilidh band made up of fèis tutors and entertainment provided by fèis participants.

The fèis has played host to a number of visiting groups from abroad, including the Ukraine, France and Germany. At the time of the Ukrainian visit, it was hoped that a return visit by the fèis would be possible and a group of harpers, singers, fiddlers and dancers began rehearsing together on a regular basis under the tutelage of Kaela Rowan and Mairi Campbell. Unfortunately, the visit was cancelled due to the situation in the Balkans and the group’s hard work was demonstrated instead at the Cèol nam Fèis concert in Inverness in 1998 and at the Sidmouth Folk Festival in 1999.
Máiri Kidd:
Fèis Dhùn Èideann

Tha mise a' smaoineachadh gum bheil Fèis Dhùn Èideann air iomhaigh na Gàidhlig a chogail ann an Dùn Èideann. Ged a tha tòrr de Chaidheil ann an Dùn Èideann a dh'fhaoadadh coinhearsnaich leàdair a chruthachadh, tha focas a dh'fhithír air – doigh gus daoine a tharaing còmhla. Tha mi a' smaoineachadh gur e sin an rud a rinn a’ chridhe fhéin. ’S e pàrantan aig an robh clann anns an ionad Chaidheil a chuir a’ chridhe fhéin air doigh, ’s bha tòrr dhaoine an sàs ann an uair sin. Saolaidh mi gu bheil e mar shanasachd airson Gàidhlig agus cultar na Gàidhlig do mhùinntir Dhùn Èideann air fad.

Tha a’ Chaidheil gu math cudromach aig Fèis Dhùn Èideann. Uaireannan tha mise a smaoineachadh gum faodadh na fèisean barrachd a dhéanamh airson Gàidhlig. B’ fhéarr leamsa gum biodh clasaichean ann far a bheil a’ chlann uile feileanta, seach maighsheadh cho far am feum thu dà chànan a chleachdadh. Tha fios agam gu bheil Fèisean nan Gàidheal ag obair an-dràsta gus na th’air a chleachdadh de Chaidheil aig na fèisean a leudachadh. Tha sinn air pasgan Gàidheal a dheasachadh do gach fèis le fosachadh agus rudan a ghabhas air a’ bhalla s tha sinn an dochas gum faigh a’ Chaidheil a’ite a’ gach fèis.

Tha Fèis Dhùn Èideann air fais gus math mòr. Aig an fhéis fhéin (fèis deireadh-sceachd) tha na h-àireamhan eadar-dhealaichte agus na bhliadhan gu bhaùidhna a bha dh’ioghadh. Bhid eadar 80 agus corr is 100 againn a-rèir cuin a bhios na laitean-saora agus tha corr is 2,000 àite gach bliadhna anns na clasaichean leantainnach (sin an obair as motha a th’ annta ach tha iad a’ bhios airson na clasaichean). Tha sinn airson gun tachair air a bhith eadar an làimh eile airson Gàidhlig a dhèanamh.

Tha fi’ os agam gu bheil Fèisean air chin air clann a’ chur air a’ bhalla ’s fheàrr leamsa ’s a’ bhàidh nach gabh tomhas air sgàth nam fèisean. Tha mi a’ chluinninn mu dheidhinn a’ bhòid fhéin gu bheil e cudromach gum bha chumaidh eadar na comataidhean a’ chuilinn ash-choimheasachd le déanamh. Tha an t-ainm a’ cluinninn mu bhòid fhéin ’s am fearr leamsa nà thoil à bhàidh air a dhèanamh.

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MAIRI KIDD:
Founder member, tutor and
Meanbh-chuileag co-ordinator
(English Summary)
I was on the original committee for Feis Dhùn Èideann and have been involved with it since I went to university in 1994. I have taught at sixteen different feisean since then, taking classes in drama, art and Gaelic. I grew up near Edinburgh, but there was nothing like this in the area when I was younger. I think that the feis has raised the profile of Gaelic in the city. Although there are many Gaels in Edinburgh and there could be a strong community, they need a focus and a way to bring people together. This focus was provided through the feis which was developed by parents with children in the Gaelic unit and which also promotes Gaelic and Gaelic culture in Edinburgh.

Some people feel that the more professional feisean are, the more removed they become from the communities and from their roots. I think there needs to be a balance because as the feisean grow, it is important that administrators are paid – it is too much for volunteer committees to run hundreds of classes each year as people all have their own jobs too. At the same time, it is still important to have volunteers in order to keep links with the communities.

Gaelic is very important at Feis Dhùn Èideann. Sometimes I think that feisean in general could do more for Gaelic. I would like there to be a class where all the children were fluent instead of mixing English and Gaelic. I know that Feisean nan Gàidheal are working at the moment to develop the amount of Gaelic used at feisean and we are producing a Gaelic pack for each feis. This will include things that can go up on the walls such as phrases, information about Gaels in the area, and proverbs so that Gaelic can be more visible at the feis.

I think that children are capable of doing a lot more because of the feisean. The impact the feisean have had on the children can’t be measured. Seeing young people who have been at feisean going on to do things such as the traditional music course at the RSAMD shows how successful the feisean have been.

In the next ten years I hope that there will be many more new feisean and I hope that the current feisean will be just as valuable to children.
The purchase of Eigg by the community made it a lot easier to organise the island’s féis. It had been the féis committee’s dream to use the empty Lodge, a perfect féis location with its numerous rooms and close proximity to the Hall, and wonderful surrounding gardens. This year that was possible and almost everything was housed under the one roof. The tutors’ ceilidh took place in the Lodge drawing room, which impressed everyone with its brilliant acoustics and which was big enough for a good sized Strìp the Willow.

CAMILLE DRESSLER: 
Féis Co-ordinator

Féis Eige started in 1995, at a time when Eigg was in an intense ferment of activity leading to the community buy-out of 1997. Music was one the things that brought everyone together on the island and it was the one area where we felt we could develop without constraints. We could see what benefit having the féis on Eigg could bring to our children because the older island children had attended Féis nan Garbh-Chìochan, the week-long féis in Acharacle and all played an instrument as a result. At that time there was very little access to anything cultural like music or art in the school. We also felt it was the way forward for our children to learn about the culture and the language of the area since there was no Gaelic taught at school. Last but not least, we felt it was important to keep the indigenous music traditions of Eigg, particularly the button box, and we felt that through the féis we could encourage the younger generation to take it up.

The first Féis Eige took place at Kildonnan House, one of the island’s big farmhouse and B&Bs run by Mairi Carr, who was born and bred on Eigg and was also a good button box player. Her kitchen at Kildonnan was the scene of great post-tuition ceilidhs over the years. This sometimes occasioned difficulties in achieving an early start for tuition. Just as well that the féis committee was ready with activities and games first thing in the morning.

Féis Eige was keen to get local tutors to teach the ‘local sound’, such as Iain MacFarlane from Glenfinnan, who were rooted in the musical traditions of West Lochaber. Féis Eige can also be

I have some great memories of the Lodge as a féis venue: hearing music flowing from each window, smelling the scent of the old fashioned roses as we were taking the artwork to dry out on the terrace in the sunshine.
I have some great memories of the Lodge as a feis venue: hearing music flowing from each window, smelling the scent of the old fashioned roses as we were taking the artwork to dry out on the terrace in the sunshine. We now use the Glebe barn which is a great venue, but it is has never been quite like the Lodge.

The kids got a lot out of the art activities that went on: batik, printing, painting, felt making, modelling and mirror making. It was great to see all these kids completely engrossed in what they were doing and enjoying what they were creating. At the time, it was really the only art activity they had in the whole year and it was so obvious that they were enjoying it. Drama was always pretty good: one of the highlights of Feis Eige was the year when we performed a play about St Donnan and the big women of Eigg, the arrival of the Vikings and the Lordship of the Isles. Storytelling was also popular but the difficulty was always to get the right tutors: that’s an area that really needs to be developed in the feis movement.

It was always difficult to get the Gaelic going in Feis Eige without enough Gaelic speaking tutors, or committee members.

Our children really never went beyond greetings and simple sentences relating to asking for biscuits or juice. This gave them an awareness of the language at least but this needs to be improved upon. Gaelic singing was always more successful, but it depended very much on the personality of the tutor and the age and gender of the participants. Iseabail MacAskill taught on Eigg one year and it was fantastic: she put a lot of efforts into showing us how to keep learning the songs, but unfortunately, it proved too hard to keep it going. Kaela Rowan got the best results one year when we had a whole group of teenage girls. They loved Kaela’s look and took up singing in Gaelic at the top of their voices for the whole of that summer.

Music wise, Feis Eige has been great for our kids as they have had practically one to one tuition in all instruments. The small size of the groups means that the children were able to take in much more, but proves to be a headache when you try to get some income in. A higher profile needs to be given to the feis to attract people interested in having a cultural experience during their holidays. A few more people would make all the difference to the viability of Feis Eige.

The community also got a lot out of the feis: it was very much one of the highlights of the year, when folks from the Small Isles and Knoydart would gather together with friends coming over from near and far. For the island children, it meant lots of things to do for the first weekend of the holidays and a lot more children to play with, new friends to make and old friends to meet again. Many of these were from Edinburgh and came to Eigg on regular visits. It was remarkable to see how children who had travelled from far endured a boat journey not always in the best conditions, enjoyed their classes and were so keen to learn and participate.

We are now working with the third generation of Eigg children. The first generation is away at college now and they are providing us with very good feis helpers. The second generation is now the teenage group: they shy away from getting actively involved in the feis – for them, the feis is what they used to do when they were young. They feel it is for younger kids, even though the committee tries to put more
of a fusion feel by including drumming and percussions in the tuition programme. But the teenagers always make sure they invite their friends over for the feis ceilidh. The third generation is much younger: this means changing the tried and tested formula: less music, more drama, more Gaelic activities and lots of art.

We have also decided to emphasize story telling at the feis as a way to allow our children to absorb Gaelic culture and deepen their awareness of the language. As Eigg now has its resident piper, Donna MacCulloch, who is one of Fèis Eige tutors and has developed strong links with the children on the neighbouring island of Muck, there is the advantage of being able to give regular tuition to children from an early age. This is helped by the Youth Music Initiative scheme, which for our islands is a good way to access tuition. Long may the scheme last! The introduction of feis funding for regular year round tuition is also very welcome and should bring some very positive results for the young kids of Eigg and Muck.

Fòream: Fiona Johnston

My daughter Alison went to Feis Obar Dheathain the year that I moved back to work in Aberdeen. She met Ronnie Mackay at the feis ceilidh and he found out about her connection with me. It was great to meet again and to find that quite a few folk who were Celtic Society members in my university days were in Aberdeen. Very quickly after that Uisdean Macrae was on the phone asking me to become involved with the feis committee. Uisdean was president of the Celtic Society when I was Vice-president so I knew I could work with him. I thoroughly enjoyed my time – eight years with Feis Obar Dheathain. It grows from strength to strength which is great to see and a credit to those who set it up so well. It is particularly good to see it thriving as we nearly lost the feis at one point. The addition of students to the committee has been great, as has the effort of the current committee.

I had the very good caring parents but I do feel they let us down by not ensuring we spoke Gaelic! Like many they had to prepare my older sister for school by teaching her English and that became a habit in the family. Gaelic became their “confidential” language too. Any discussion about surgery business in our presence took place in Gaelic. They were not alone in thinking they were doing the right thing for their family at that time.

The Mod was a day off school for me but participating in it was torture. I am not competitive by nature and a nervous performer. A feis would have better suited many others including myself. I remember feeling it was wrong that those who could not sing or read poetry etc. did not get a day off school too! There is a place for the Mod – I do not mean that it is wrong – it does exclude some but is still a very important part of promoting Gaelic culture. Now though we have the feis! I notice a confidence and pride in their Gaelic heritage within young people today that was not there when I was young. So many more young folk play instruments and enjoy their music. It is great to see.

I have spent all my adult life in and out of prison! I worked as a probation officer – later called criminal justice social worker – so I have always been very aware of the importance of engaging with young people. The feisean do that and I am confident that, if research were possible, it would be clear that involvement with the feisean has kept many away from the criminal justice system. To me the emphasis on inclusion is the key to the success of the feisean. This aspect of their success has not been sufficiently acknowledged. At a Board
COLLA MACDONALD: Administrator, Fèis Obar Dheathain and Musician, Harris Tweed Broges

To begin with I started playing the piano, so there was music in the house. I tried the fiddle, one my brother had at the house. I then got lessons and took an interest in it. I was alright and improved bit by bit. The fèis offered me the opportunity to learn for a week and to play with other people and play other instruments. It wouldn’t have been as easy getting lessons privately. I think the fèis really made a big difference. Seeing past participants as tutors at the fèis gives inspiration to the kids – it encourages them.

I’ve been involved in the fèis in Aberdeen for about two years now. The fèis runs over the school holiday weekend in February. We have the usual mixture of subjects as well as drama, dance and shinty. It’s always been Gaelic content at our fèis which gives the participants a taste of the language. We want to offer opportunities for participants to learn about their culture whilst having fun. This fèis is important because it’s far away from the Gaelic areas, (although around 3,000 people speak Gaelic in the city).

In 2005 Fèis Obar Dheathain celebrated its tenth anniversary. We’re happy with our numbers just now but there are opportunities for development. The local communities offer us support, from parents to the local authorities.
The fèis movement is important for improving the situation of Gaelic in general, without it not much would be happening in some areas.

**Fèis Dhùn Bhreatuinn**

Dumbarton 1996

The first fèis in Dumbarton ran over two days as a pilot project, offering workshops in Gaelic, chanter, Hebridean dance, fiddle, keyboards and tin whistle. Thirty children took part and had an informal concert at the end of the two days. In his evaluation report, Community Worker Colin Bruce wrote:

> The majority of participants went away able to speak a few words of Gaelic and with a taste of the traditions that go with it. This informal class was a success and should be developed along with the fèis. Overall the fèis ran very well... the aim was to stimulate interest in Gaelic language and culture through its associated traditional music, song and dance. I feel we have achieved our aim and our next step is the establishment of a steering committee to take it forward.

**KATE KERR:**

*Chair, Fèis Dhùn Bhreatuinn*

Initially the fèis was a week long fèis, but we now run for six weeks from February to March with classes in the evenings during the week for eight to nine year olds. There is also a schools project that runs for the six weeks, with about four or five schools in the area doing some basic Gaelic and singing. At the end of the six weeks there is a cèilidh night.

Apart from the fèis there is nothing in the way of Gaelic or traditional music in the area. It is difficult to even get a feel for Scotland or Scottish things in the schools, it is not always welcomed. This year we have had continuation classes for the first time, with classes from Easter until June. There hasn’t been the funding to do this before now. Everyone on the committee is voluntary, but we all enjoy it and look forward to their monthly meetings.

Some classes are more popular than others; clàrsach and accordion are very popular, as was bodhrán this year. We don’t really have any problems getting tutors, but would have liked to have had more clàrsach at the fèis. We try to speak as much Gaelic as possible at the evening classes, but we want the children to be comfortable with it. We welcome them in Gaelic and have a bit of an introduction with them, adding phrases as we go along.

Feisean down south have different problems to fèisean in the Highlands. There are a lot of people who are not very welcoming towards Gaelic. Even in schools some of the staff wonder why they should bother with it, so we are fighting an uphill struggle. The fèis movement is important for improving the situation of Gaelic in general, without it not much would be happening in some areas.

Feis nan Gàidheal have worked very hard to help as many people as possible to have a fèis.

In the future I would like to be able to have classes throughout the year, with steadily increasing numbers. I would like people in the area to be more aware of their culture, with traditions being spread throughout the area. It would be good if the fèis could become more of a focal point for the whole area.
Feis Innis an Uillt

Bishopbriggs 1996

The bigger féisean are great, especially if the children are musically inclined then that’s absolutely fantastic for them. I think the smaller féisean just add to that and help people to come along and to make a start.

ROBERT JOHNSTONE:
Former Chair and Treasurer

I believe our féis started around nine years ago. The féis development worker, David Boag came to meet some of the parents and told them all about the féisean. They applied for a grant, organised the first féis and it’s gone on from there.

The féis consists of three or four half-day workshops throughout the school year, with usually three subjects on offer which the kids all try. We’ve now added shinty as a subject at the féisean which the kids seem to enjoy. In May we have a full-day féis with more choice and a final concert for the kids to perform. At the full-day féis, the Primary ones come for half a day and try some subjects.

The féis is targeted at children of the primary school and those that have moved onto the first two years of high school. It’s not exclusively for them but at the moment we don’t advertise it outside that area. The whole idea is to give them a taste for music and then they can get private lessons or go to another féis.

It all takes place at Meadowbank Primary School in Bishopbriggs. It’s organised in the school because it’s simplest and it suits the organisation. Through the years we’ve probably offered most subjects that you could offer at a féis. Also, we offer art which we always give a Gaelic or Scottish theme and we try to connect the art theme with the drama.

Some of the tutors can cover different subjects either on the same day or on different days. It works quite well because you need fewer tutors but you can offer more subjects. Some of the parents help out in doing some of the tutoring when we can’t get hold of tutors, which is one of the hardest tasks for the committee.

We usually have a committee meeting a month prior to each workshop and occasionally through the year for other things as well. At that stage we’ll be organising and preparing for the féis. Over the past two years the organisation was taking up a lot of time in my life. For a couple of years we didn’t have any committee members with a Gaelic connection so we struggled a bit from that point of view.

The reason we got involved in the féis is because our children attend a Gaelic-medium education unit. I think that the féis is a useful addition to what the children do and the cultural aspects of Gaelic-medium education are a big advantage to us. We now have a Sradagan on a weekly basis but, prior to that starting, the children would never have got together except at birthday parties and so on. At least at the féisean there is a Gaelic theme to it so the féisean are amongst other events in keeping with giving them more exposure to Gaelic. I think that’s a big thing.

The bigger féisean are great, especially if the children are musically inclined then that’s absolutely fantastic for them. I think the smaller féisean just add to that and help people to come along and to make a start.
SUZANNE IRVINE:

Administrator,
The fèis began in 1997 and I went along the following year to learn the fiddle. I was asked to help a couple of younger children and from then on I ended up on the committee. As a member I’ve been secretary, treasurer and chairperson on a rotation basis, and now I’m a paid administrator.

Because we’re a rural community, parents have to transport kids to the fèis which meant that we were sitting in our cars waiting on the kids during the event. Eventually we thought we were as well to join in, so that’s how we became a family fèis.

It is ability-based as opposed to age-based, so adults are in classes learning with the children. The advantage is that everyone learns at the same rate and perhaps the children’s behaviour is better because there are adults around. On the other hand, some people feel under pressure because an eight year old can play better than they can! So it’s developed into a family fèis now.

We encourage feedback every year so that we can make changes. When I started at the fèis we had thirty-two accordionists and I was one of ten fiddlers. Now we have forty fiddlers and three accordionists. It’s nice not to have a fixed routine and that we’re not shoe-horned into a specific criteria.

The fèis has changed from being a three-day, midweek fèis during the summer holidays into a two-day weekend fèis, so that the parents could share that experience with their children. Between fifty and a hundred people come to our fèis. About seventy would be a good fèis for us, which is more than enough for a committee of about a dozen people to be looking after.

We try to use local musicians and young tutors as well. As much as it would be grand to use big names and professional musicians like Bruce MacGregor and Gordon Gunn, we’re not a big fèis and we don’t pretend to be. These guys are really busy and more able to cater for the big fèisean like Fèis Rois. So we try to use local tutors and develop them. It’s a real sense of achievement to help them and they’re enthusiastic about the fèis.

As the size of the fèis has changed, so have our location requirements. We started off in Strathglass which is the glen between the Cannich and Beauly in the Cille Mhòraig area, but there was not one specific venue with a number of rooms within, so we used church halls, the shinty hall and committee rooms. It took a lot of organisation but we managed to do that. Then we moved up to Beauly one year, thinking that we could keep the children in one area. Especially in a rural environment, it was important for them to get together and socialise, as well as learn. Then Glen Urquhart High School in Drumnadrochit opened and this is ideal, everyone is in one place.

We’ve used that for the last two years. If we could just lift that school up and put it in Beauly, it would be perfect! But there are plans afoot over the next ten years to move back there.

All the schools in the area are involved and we try to work hand in hand with the music classes provided by the Highland Council. I see more integration with the bigger scene in the long term. Rather than trying to do our wee bit in isolation, we’ll work with everyone else and hopefully some good will come of it.

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Fèis Ratharsaidh
Isle of Raasay 1998

REBECCA MACKAY:
Fèis Organiser

I became involved in Fèis an Earraich in Plockton in 1989 and then wanted to have a fèis in Raasay to encourage children to learn about our culture via the fèis movement.

Fèis Ratharsaidh started about eight or nine years ago. There wasn’t much demand for the fèis from others in the area; only one child had gone to Fèis an Earraich, and it was quite difficult to get locals to realise the value of the fèis movement.

At one point classical music was taught in the local school and there was some debate about whether this form of music should be taught, and not traditional music.

As well as grant aid from Fèisean nan Gàidheal, financial help for the first fèis came from the Raasay Heritage Trust, which still gives monetary and voluntary support. Our fèis takes place in February from Thursday to Saturday and is residential, the residential aspect being part of the fèis experience for the children – including trying to stay up the latest, and not get caught.

At first, most of the children came from Skye and Lochalsh, with one or two locals attending; now we have a lot more local, day pupils. We have about thirty-six children of all ages attending this year, some being as young as four years old.

Most of the children are in Gaelic Medium education, and all adults involved are either fluent or learning Gaelic. The best way to get children enthusiastic about Gaelic is through music especially Gaelic song.

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Classes include piping, fiddle, mouth organ, guitar, drums, Highland dance, Gaelic song, and drama. On the Saturday, we have an hour-long concert for parents to see what their child has learned.

As it is a small fèis, the classes can be tailored to suit the children, and although we haven’t had problems getting instruments or tutors, it has proved impossible to have classes throughout the year as we don’t have anywhere to hold them. But with the new Community Hall being built, we should have somewhere as of next year.

Finally, Fèis Ratharsaidh must be the only fèis where its participants have en suite accommodation in the Isle of Raasay Hotel!
4. *fèis*

From 2000 to 2005, the work of Fèisean nan Gàidheal went from strength to strength. Funding was accessed to appoint four support workers in order to support and develop local fèisean across Scotland. A training officer post, shared with the Tutor Training network, enabled the development of a comprehensive programme of tutor, volunteer and staff training. A website, www.fèisean.org was redeveloped and each fèis was supplied with an internet ready computer. In 2003, new funding from HIE put the fèisean onto more secure financial footing, doubling the level of grant aid available to local initiatives. The theatre-in-education project, Meanbh-Chuileag, was set up by Fèis Dhùn Èideann and supported by Fèisean nan Gàidheal. Resources to local fèisean had been increased with the publication of two *Cèol nam Fèis* music books and a Gaelic learner’s course, and the musical instrument bank increased to over two hundred instruments. The third *Cèol nam Fèis* concert in Eden Court Theatre, Inverness involved participants from many fèisean performing to a sell-out audience. ‘Harvest’, directed by Capercaillie’s Donald Shaw involved 75 fèis performers in a Celtic Connections concert in Glasgow. By the year 2004-5, 43 local fèisean were in place and over 13,000 young people had taken part in fèis-related activities.

In a major new development in 2004, Fèisean nan Gàidheal were asked by Highland Council to deliver a programme of traditional music tuition as part of the Youth Music Initiative announced by First Minister Jack McConnell MSP, set up with £17.5 million of Scottish Executive funding. The project aimed to ensure that by 2006, every primary school pupil should have access to at least one year’s free music tuition by the time they reached primary six. The initiative was administered by the Scottish Arts Council through local authorities, with a formula agreed by COSLA. The initiative was first delivered in Inverness, Caithness, Lochaber and Badenoch & Strathspey, through Fèis Spè, Fèis Rois and the Lochaber fèisean, with Skye & Lochalsh, Ross-shire and Inverness added later.

In 2005 two important events took place. First, a Bill was passed by the Scottish Parliament to enhance the status of the Gaelic language. At last, measures were set in place to safeguard the language, and offer equal respect with English in education and civic life. During the same month, Feis Bharraigh, the original initiative which influenced the growth of the fèisean, celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary.

In the five year period from 2000 to 2005, a further twelve new fèisean were established, two resulting from the Dùthchas project which provided Scottish Arts Council start-up funding for new arts initiatives. Of four new fèisean in the Glasgow area, three were set up by parents supporting Gaelic-medium education, including the drama-based Fèis Òigridh Ghlaschu. Previous fèisean were revived through new initiatives: in north Lochaber, in Applecross by the local Gaelic group *Bealach*, and Ness, Lewis, in the new cultural centre, Taigh Dhonnchaidh. New fèisean emerged in Nairn and in Stirling, in the tri-lingual Fèis sa Mheadhan – Fest o’ the Mids, which combined Gaelic and Scots cultural tuition in an exciting new approach.

4. **the millennium**

By the year 2004-5, 43 local fèisean were in place and over 13,000 young people had taken part in fèis-related activities.
Fèis Thròdairnis takes place in Trotternish, in the north end of the Isle of Skye. It runs for four days in July/August, involving around fifty children. Gaelic is used in drama, art and singing activities, and children usually devise a bilingual drama or puppet show. This small family fèis has two unique aspects. One is that a theme is chosen, usually a local tale or legend, and songs, drama, art and dance focus on this theme: this year, 2006, it was ‘The Old Man of Storr’, and the other is that children are encouraged to try out different classes, rather than stay with the same class all week.

Shaoil sinne gum biodh e na b’fhasa dhuinn rudeigin a thòiseachadh a bha a’ dol a dh’obair mar fhéis, an àite a bhith ag obair air rud úr. Leis an-sin, thug iad airgead dhuinn airson an fhéis a ruith. Bha mi fhèin an sàs ann am foghlaim coimhearsnachd anns an eilean agus bha mi gu math eolach air feisean an deidh a bhith a’ teagasg orra. Cha robh mòran ciúil anns an ghré an uair sin agus bha sin dìreach airson ‘s gum biodh rudeigin car eadar-dhealaichte ann, a bhiodh freagarrach airson na clàir òga. Tha na fhèisean eadar-dhealaichte – bidh a h-uile duine a’ dearnamh a h-uile càil aig an tè seo. Cha bhi a’ chumadh dhùthchas airson feasa a bhith air rud úr.

ANN Mhàrtainn:
Fèis Thròdairnis
Tha Fèis Thròdairnis eadar-dhealaichte seach fèisean eile. Bha a’ bhuidheann choimhearsnachd Dùthschas den bheachd gun robh feum ann air rudeigin airson nan ealan ann an Eilein Spìtheanaich. An uair sin thàinig Comhairle Ealain na h-Alba dhan sgìre le £5,000 ‘s iad a faighneachd dhuinn dè na seòrsa rudan a bha sinn ag iarraidh a chur air chois anns an sgìre. Shaoil sinne gum biodh e na b’fhasa dhuinn rudeigin a thòiseachadh a bha a’ dol a dh’obair mar fhéis an àite a bhith ag obair air rud úr. Leis an-sin, thug iad airgead dhuinn airson an fhéis a ruith.

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Bhó fíor thoiseach bhò a’ chomataidh airson ’s gum biodh e na b’fhása dhuinn rudeigin a thòiseachadh a bha a’ dol a dh’obair mar fhéis, an àite a bhith ag obair air rud úr.

A chionn ’s gu bheil an fhéis cho beag, tha fios agam air cò an fhèaidh ann a tha a’ thiginn agus ma tha iad math air ceol no ma tha iad a’ faighinn chlasaichean tron bhliadhna, bidh sinn a’ deannamh cinnteach gu bheil iad a’ faighinn barrachd taic na an fhèaidh ann eile.

Chan eil mòran dheugairean timcheallach a-chìd sinn a’ feuchainn ri rud eigin a dhéanamh dhaibh a h-uile bliadhna. Air an oidhche tha sinn a’ feuchainn ri clasaichean a chumail far am faod inbhich, deugairean agus clann òg a bhith a’ thiginn comha. ’S e fèis airson na clasaichean a th’ ann, chan ann dìreach airson na cloinne.

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Feis Thròdairnis
Trotternish, Isle of Skye 2000
50 children attend the feis each year and it runs for four days, with the children going home each night. This feis is more personal than a bigger feis. If children are receiving tuition throughout the year, organisers make sure that they get the right tuition for them as individuals at the feis.

In the evening, there are classes where children, teenagers and adults can come together. It is a feis for the whole community. From the very beginning we wanted the whole community to benefit.

As the feis is small we haven’t had many problems getting tutors or instruments. Every year we try to attract people to come to teach at the feis, as well as having tutors from the area.

We raise money ourselves, but have never organised a ‘fundraiser’ as such. When we put on a ceilidh it is for fun and every time we have had a ceilidh we have held a raffle to raise more money.

The feis has a Gaelic flavour, but as not everyone involved has Gaelic, not everything is in Gaelic. However, we see song and drama as very important for the language. Feisean are very important for strengthening the situation of Gaelic in general. A feis should encourage the language, but this should happen in a natural way, through singing and drama, so that people don’t feel that it isn’t their feis if they don’t speak Gaelic. It is very different to a feis in a city, as the children here are aware of Gaelic already as they hear it spoken in the area.

Looking ahead, I would like more music to be encouraged in the area, for the feis to be more integrated with the community and to support the young musicians and bands that are emerging from the feis movement.

TALITHA:
Participant aged 9

While I was at the feis with my two friends, we had art in the morning. We really enjoyed the art, not only because it’s art, but because the tutors who were doing it were really quite nice. They were helpful as well. We were painting lots of different things for a puppet show, called ‘The Old Man of Storr’. Most of it was in Gaelic, it was kind of bilingual. For example, one person starts by saying ‘hello, how are you’ and the other one answers ‘tha mise ceàr gu leòr’.

I did fiddle in the morning as well in preparation for a concert we had on Thursday. It was really quite good because I did fiddle ages ago, but I had to give the fiddle I was using back to the Feis because someone needed it, so I hadn’t practiced, but now I’m quite good at it so I’m going to try and get some lessons. In the afternoon, we did song, percussion and whistle. In whistle, I knew the tune we were doing, because I’d sung it at school. It was Sìne Bhàn, which means ‘Fair Jean’. Percussion was quite good. I was going to change but everyone said you’re getting good at it, so I didn’t change. And we had to make up a song. For singing there were three groups, two groups made songs about the Old Man of Storr, and our group made up a song for the Feis Thròdairnis, which goes like this:

Faìlte! Gu am fèis againn.
Faìlte! Gu Feis Thròdairnis.
Thig a-steach is a’ seinn ‘s a’ deamh deallbh.

We play the fiddle – squeak, squeak.
We paint pictures, splash, splash.
We dance with joy, tip, tap.
Fun and laughter, all day long!

Cluichidh sinn druma, boom, boom.
Cluichidh sinn an fhirdeag, doot, doot.

Seinnidh sinne dràin, la, la.
Air a chuì ri chèile airson ceàthadh.

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Fèis a’ Bhealaich
Applecross, Wester Ross 2000

DEREK MACLENNAN: Chairman
I’d been involved with the fèis in Applecross for a number of years, back when it was Fèis na Comraich. I was there as a vice-chairman, giving guidance I suppose. That was about four or five years ago.

Then we decided to start with a fresh approach. One problem here is isolation. It’s a fair drive to get to Applecross over the Bealach with twenty five miles along the coast to Shieldaig, and the road isn’t that good. In the winter you’re going to be cut off at least a few times in the year. The population of the Applecross, from Toscaig up to the Bay area is around two hundred and fifty. The name ‘Bealach’, from Bealach nam Bo, the pass of the cattle, draws in communities like Applecross, Torridon, Shieldaig, and Kishorn in Wester Ross.

When Fèis na Comraich was still going we decided to set up an organisation to help out with Gaelic in Applecross – called ‘Bealach’. We believed that the best way forward was to have ‘Bealach’ as an umbrella group and the fèis would come under the organisation. Then we thought we might as well call it Fèis a’ Bhealaich, to tie in with the group. With the way the fèis is connected with the Bealach group, we organise Gaelic classes for adults and have been working with Comhairle nan Sgoiltean Arainn (CNSA) to start up a cròileagan, a Gaelic playgroup. So we’re holding out our hopes for that, with new native speakers of Gaelic in Applecross.

At the most recent fèis, we invited pupils from the other schools in the area. This boosted our numbers from twelve, the school roll in Applecross, to twenty. Previously, the approach was to combine adult and children’s classes at the fèis. This year the demand was from children, so that is where our focus will be. It’s a valid number for here and it’s good to bring in some others too. This year we had classes in chanter, whistle, clàrsach, singing and fiddle. We have offered a wider range of classes, but it’s hard to justify when you have such small numbers of people turning up for the fèis. It seemed to me that this time we should try a smaller number of more versatile tutors and it seemed to work out well.

The organisation for the fèis is done at home, with the help of a computer and a telephone. It takes up a fair amount of my life. The fèis runs over a weekend in late September, on a Friday and Saturday. When the actual fèis takes place, the school staff look after things and I come in to make sure everything is ok.

One of the big challenges we have here is that although there’s an older Gaelic speaking community, the younger sections of the community perhaps don’t know much about Gaelic, maybe because they haven’t been exposed to it enough. So I see our role as trying to persuade people to see that there is a future in Gaelic. It’s not just a thing for the past but for the future.

We kept the programme scaled down to three tutors, because I see it as a bit of a new start for the fèis, with a new name and a more focused approach. So this is smaller, stronger and...
We’ve just started as Feis a’ Bhealaich. There are children from the area who have gone on and kept up their musical instruments and I’m sure the Feis has played its part in giving people an awareness of their music and their culture.

Other opportunities in the area include the tuition though the school which is provided by a travelling music teacher. In fact, my son has started learning the pipes, but can’t continue on grounds of numbers because to have a travelling music teacher you need two or three pupils who want to learn the pipes before the teacher will come through, so he loses out. So the Feis helps to make up the shortfall.

I feel that the Feis and the culture is something that is worth preserving. Applecross has a strong cultural heritage and I feel it would be a shame to let it go. And since I feel that way, I have to take on the mantle as it were. Now, I’m not a traditional musician — and I didn’t start out that way — but at the same time I respect those who are and I like what they do. So, my role is to encourage those who will, draw from the culture and strengthen it up.

I think that the Feis helps to make up the shortfall. I think that it is very important for young people in the Highlands to have self-esteem. It is crucially important, not just in terms of being able to play musical instruments, but about people feeling good about themselves and wanting to live in the area. This has many positive spin-offs including improvements to the economy. It runs all the way down the line. It’s about children feeling confident about who they are and moving forward positively into the future. And not just people who come from a Gaelic background, it’s something to share for all who live here, a shared legacy. I believe that is particularly true in Applecross, where most of the young people don’t have Gaelic roots. I feel it’s my role here to show them that the Feis is something fun to participate in and something that is open and available to them.

You can’t blame someone for coming into an area and seeing that there’s nothing there and saying ‘where is your music, where is your culture that you talk about?’ Well, here it is.

As well as our annual Feis we’ve taken on some follow-on workshops. We have two or three in the year, to keep things ticking over for those who don’t have much other opportunity to have tuition with their instruments.

It’s hard to judge an improvement so far because hopefully a good foundation for a more steady secure Feis with a good chance of surviving. It’s quite a challenge keeping a Feis going in an area of such low population.

Keeping up numbers who are prepared to be committed is important. There’s a number of responsibilities to take on in a small community. Particularly someone of my age with a family to look after, a croft to keep and a day job to do. Sometimes it might be easier to sit and watch TV – but that won’t keep a Feis running! I think you have to have a clear idea of what your motives are, what you want to do and where it’s heading. I think that the success has always got to be that some young person has been inspired to pick up a musical instrument and play it, and they know where it’s coming from.

We have maybe half a dozen adults who come as well. They get tuition and help the youngsters. The Feis workshops last around three hours between 10am and 1pm. The parents usually have to wait for their children, so instead of just hanging around, they come in and help out at the classes. It’s been very successful.

To begin with we had the workshops in different places: in Durness, Tongue, Strathy, Bettyhill and Melvich. We tried that for over a year, but it was difficult to get all the children and instruments to the places. Then we thought we’d try the High School in Bettyhill, and it’s been more successful there, with more room and places for the instruments. Also the children know it’s going to be in the High School every year. The Feis has grown from strength to strength since then, it’s been very popular with the youngsters.

Maybe the way we run it is a little different from Feis in the more populated areas. Really, our Feis is a series of workshops. Then at the end of school session we have a big concert. It’s really difficult for us along the coast to have something residential, so we run our Feis every second Saturday throughout the school term. We have thirty seven children on our books just now, which is a lot for the north coast.

JANETTE MACKAY:
Secretary

The Feis is run for children and adults from Strath Halladale to Durness, right along the north coast. The numbers of Gaelic speakers are very low and the Feis started up because even on the musical side, as well as the language side, it was starting to worry me. In the year 2000, there was an ‘Initiative on the Edge’ project. We went along to a meeting about this and there was the offer of £5,000 from the Scottish Arts Council if we could come up with a worthy project. Immediately I said yes – I wanted to see a Feis started. So we put in a bid for the money and we got it. The Feis has grown from strength to strength since then, it’s been very popular with the youngsters.

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second Saturday so it works much better. We would like to run a féis over a weekend but the accommodation is the only difficulty.

Music tuition was really rock bottom before we started. There’s not anybody around here who could provide tuition, they’d have to go to Wick. It was only after my kids went away when I realised that there wasn’t much going on here. We’ve had as many as 42 kids taking part and on average you can be sure there’ll be around twenty five at every workshop.

The kids really like the sessions where they can play together. The tutors have a book made up so they can all learn the same tune. It’s wonderful when you hear the fiddle, accordion and drums all coming together to play the same tune. Also, our music book that we made for our own use is available locally. We put some easy tunes together and we plan to make a new one, adding more tunes. A music CD is something which we would hope to do in the future.

There’s about ten of us on the committee and it works out very well. If parents come in and they’re waiting for classes we always ask them if they want to join our committee. Not everyone can be there at the time of the workshops and it can be good to have people to call on. It lets them know they’re welcome to help with the féis.

We got about £4,000 from the Lottery, which meant we were able to buy a lot of instruments and books, so the féis is quite well equipped. When I was working in the school it was easy for me to keep an eye on the instruments. Now they’re locked in a cupboard! Some organisations are able to give you money for instruments, but not for running classes. It’s a lot of money running classes.

We are far away from everyone, and cover a wide area; about fifty miles or more across the north. I think it would be nice for the children for others to come to us and show us what they’re doing, or we could take a group to see what the others are up to, which would be a help to us, just to show that we’re part of the bigger picture. We do go to Féis Chataibh in Golspie, with a few going to Ullapool to the teenage féis.

We have good fiddlers who are in a group in Thurso. There are about five of them now just starting to play the bagpipes; it takes a long time to learn the pipes. Some of the teenagers have moved on and have a band of their own now. The band started with the féis, that’s where they got their music tuition.

We have to encourage the children with Gaelic. Our tutors, Roddy and Marisa come and do Gaelic games with the children. If we have tutors with Gaelic, they try a bit of Gaelic with them, getting them to count in the tune in Gaelic. So we do keep Gaelic in the féis.

I am hopeful of the féis making a revival of music and language along the north coast. I think it’s the music that’s keeping the language alive along the coast here. And I do enjoy it, I must say!
FIONA MORRISON: Feis Co-ordinator

Taigh Dhonnchaidh in Ness was specifically set up to provide a facility in North Lewis for music tuition, art, language and dance. The feis runs throughout the year during the school term, with an extra week during Ceòl Nis which is open to all.

We felt that it was important to safeguard our culture for future generations and also to recognise the impact the culture has on tourism and on the provision of jobs. The education system does not provide sufficient time for tuition in this field. This was the ethos of the late Duncan Morrison who spent the latter part of his life giving music tuition to pupils in the rural schools of Lewis and Harris.

In 2001, David Boag supported the committee that rebuilt the cottage and motivated us to apply to Feisean nan Gàidheal for funding. Since then the feis has gone from strength to strength with the continued support of the staff at Feisean nan Gàidheal. The feis has proved very successful in the area, with tutors coming from as far as Stornoway and participants coming from as far as Barvas to Ness. Numbers have continued to grow with regular attendees. The feis has also attracted people from all over the world when they’re visiting the area. Ceòl Nis has allowed us to create strong links with Connamara and we hope to extend further links to Northern Ireland, Europe and America.

We felt that it is important to safeguard our culture for future generations and also to recognise the impact the culture has on tourism and on the provision of jobs. Gaelic classes have been provided weekly in Taigh Dhonnchaidh, attended mostly by parents whose children are attending Gaelic medium education. During Féis Taigh Dhonnchaidh, those involved are mainly native Gaelic speakers and we are currently in the process of providing the equivalent Gaelic provision during the feis week, which this year is 31st July – 4th August. The difficulty in this area is that we do not have the funding to ensure that all the classes have the supervision to encourage Gaelic to be spoken at each class. Extra funding would provide for a Gaelic speaker to be present at each class.

In the spring we hold a concert for the community, where the tutors and participants perform the material they have learned. This gives the children an incentive and keeps them motivated to continue to another level.
SANDY DEVERS:
Chairman

I became interested in Gaelic as my mother was a Gaelic singer, and I grew up listening to Gaelic music. I got involved in the Glasgow Islay Gaelic Choir and through that heard about the fèis movement and thought it would be a good idea to run a fèis in Carmunnock in the south side of Glasgow. I had never been to a fèis before, but a friend had been at the first fèis in Barra. I’ve travelled abroad with the choir and am a bit embarrassed when I see how people in other countries have a real hunger for the Gaelic culture, when people over here aren’t really engaging in Gaelic. The only traditional music activity in the area was through a friend and me, who would have gigs in the hall in Carmunnock.

People need to approach things from a different angle so that the Gaelic community doesn’t come across as being closed.
So we decided that it would be a good idea to have a special day when we had a feis.

The first and only full-day feis was a day of activities on 26 May 2001. The weather that day was so good that we forgot about the venues we had arranged and held everything outside. We had a story-teller, step-dancing and Gaelic song. It was well-attended on the day by local adults and children, who had never engaged with the language or music before this. The day was unforgettable, but we didn’t manage to sustain this, although we did give people a taste of Gaelic culture. At the moment we have some piping lessons for children. We are still registered as a feis, and want to remain so.

It is more difficult to organise something like a feis in somewhere like Carmunnock, as unless we mix with those who have direct Gaelic connections it can all seem a bit alien to people. I really had to battle to get the feis on the agenda and get co-operation from the local people. However we pulled together a good committee which I chaired.

I think that activities like visual arts and drama are a good way of raising awareness of Scotland’s indigenous culture. My business involves recruiting people from abroad to come and work in Scotland, and things like culture and music interest people and bring them together and should not be underestimated.

The language needs to be made more accessible, for example, in the way that the language becomes alive for people who are interested in hill-walking and want to know what the names of the different hills mean. People need to approach things from a different angle so that the Gaelic community doesn’t come across as being closed. I admire Feisean nan Gàidheal as an organisation and feel that the feis movement is really important in making sure that our whole culture doesn’t become homogenised with an anglo-centric view.
important way to introduce children and young people to the language. The fèis is a way of demonstrating to youngsters that Gaelic is more than just in the classroom, that it is part of the wider community. There is a richness to the culture that they should be tapping into. The first couple of years we had large numbers of children who were there simply because it was the event in their area they could be ‘put to’ while the parents were at work, so we changed the format and really strengthened the Gaelic aspect. This led to a drop in numbers, which we anticipated, but it has meant that those who have come are there because they want to be there.

Numbers at our main fèis are now growing despite limited exposure to traditional music in the local area. As the youngsters don’t have a knowledge of the music, we need to encourage them into it. However, it is a positive sign that many that have been to the fèis once have got enough out of the experience to come back again. One year we tried to run three events at the same time to cover a wider area, with week-long events in Greenock, Paisley and the Eastwood area, but this proved difficult. We now have one week-long event in the autumn and one in the summer, backed up with workshops.

What makes this fèis unusual within the fèis movement is that for most of the youngsters in the area this is their first exposure to Gaelic. We want to show them that it is lively, with a lot to offer them, and one way of doing this is through the vibrancy of the music. The fèis is for fun, and at the final concert everyone is able to demonstrate that they have made some progress during the week.

The fèis might create an interest in music and Gaelic, but the difficulty is then providing young people with the opportunity to go on further. If you get good tutors who are able to present the language in a positive and lively way then the interest will be maintained. This is what we have tried to do at the fèis by using many recent graduates of the RSAMD or Strathclyde University’s Applied Music course, or experienced teachers of Gaelic. This means that the youngsters are not just getting someone who is a good musician, they are getting someone who has been through the formal discipline of music tuition, or is already a Gaelic teacher, which has helped enormously.

I’ve been very impressed by the professionalism of all the tutors we’ve used and find it encouraging that people are getting employment through the music. The tutors are very good role models for the children at fèisean, which is also one of the objectives of trying to use young tutors where possible. Although one year this worked for a different reason, when a lot of young girls wanted to switch to dancing when they saw who would be taking the classes!

We can have problems getting instruments for the fèis because of where we are, and our main fèis runs in the summer when other fèisean are happening. One year the carrier arrived at the hall on the Friday afternoon – just as the final concert was about to start – to uplift all of the clarsach to go to Ullapool in order to get the boat to Lewis! We had to tell the driver he would have to wait for an hour and a half, and as soon as the children had performed he took the clarsach away. Clarsach and fiddles normally come from Arran, as they have their fèis just before Fèis Naomh Chonbhail, so I go down to Ardrossan to collect them as they come off the ferry. Clarsach is generally the most popular discipline chosen by participants and we have often had support from Comunn na Clàrsaich (The Clarsach Society) to obtain sufficient instruments to meet our needs.

We have different games at breaks, but found that last year all of the children had mobile phones with them and just wanted to play games on them! One year we timed the fèis to coincide with a play that was taking place in the area. We worked together to give the play a Highland theme, so that the fèis could contribute music and language to the play, and the fèis youngsters would experience being on a professional stage with professional lighting and sound. The clarsach players visited a recording studio to record extracts that were used to provide backing to the whole performance as well as playing ‘live’ during the play. The highlight that year was to see and hear twenty children, who had no previous involvement with Gaelic, belting out Soraidh leibh, ’s oilichte mhath leibh on stage at night, after an afternoon’s rehearsal with the fèis participants.

It can be a struggle to try to deliver events without a solid base of Gaelic speakers. Lack of parental help is a major issue for the future of the fèis in this area. We need to get music and Gaelic exposure into the schools so that we will have a pool of people who know what it’s all about. We have publicised the fèis in schools in the area with leaflets, and have tried ‘taster’ sessions. I feel that real progress is heavily dependent on getting more traditional music included in the school music curriculum, supplemented with weekend workshops and after-school activities. We have recently made progress in this regard locally and are beginning to see the benefits reflected in increasing numbers of participants and higher levels of expertise.

A local community group, ClannGàidhlig (www.clanngaindhlig.org.uk), has been established recently to enable those interested in Gaelic to meet socially and to promote greater awareness of the language in the wider community. This is mainly focused at adults, but we also try and support an interest among the youth in music and Gaelic language, and hope that through this we will get additional support for fèisean in this area. If Fèisean nan Gàidheal want to make an impact in areas such as the central belt, we need to think long and hard about how the fèisean can best be supported in these areas.

What makes this fèis unique within the fèis movement is that for most of the youngsters in the area this is their first exposure to Gaelic.
Fèis Òigridh Ghlaschu
Glasgow 2002

Fèis Òigridh Ghlaschu is a drama-based fèis for children in Gaelic medium education in the Glasgow area. The activity begins with a programme of outreach visits by a drama tutor to the participating schools. Each year a different theme is chosen and the various groups, with a great deal of help both from the tutor and their class teachers, put together a ten minute performance based on that theme. All groups then come together in the Mitchell Theatre, Glasgow to perform these plays to a packed house.

Great work is being done by this committee in bringing these young people together in such a positive and high quality way. Not only does it provide a great educational opportunity for the young people, it helps to strengthen the use of their language and allows them to meet other Gaelic-speaking young people.

WILMA KENNEDY:
Gaelic Drama Tutor
I’ve worked in Glasgow with the Gaelic Drama Association in their non-competitive festival for about six or seven years. They had started doing workshops for Gaelic medium children and realised it was easier to send me out to schools than trying to bring the children together, so I would go out to schools a couple of times each year for two weeks and would cover eight or nine schools in Stirling, Glasgow, Hillpark, Kilmarnock, Greenock, all in one week. You would sometimes do a drama class on electricity, or the Vikings or ‘Granny as a wee girl’. So I would have to make up lessons on the spot, on some topic like ‘recycling’ in Gaelic! – and this would help the staff to get some new ideas, and the kids would learn new skills.

MONA WILSON:
Rùinaire, Fèis Òigridh Ghlaschu
Ciamar a thòisich mise anns an obair seo? Uill, dè a’ Ghàidhlig a th’ ann agus ’s e sin an toilcchas a tha sinne a’ faighinn às cuideachd.

Tha fhìos aca gur e spòrs a th’ ann agus ’s e sin an toilcchas a tha sinne a’ faighinn às cuideachd.
Taic air gid às na comhairlean
Mar is trice bidh sinn a' faighinn dhéanamh ro làimh.
Obair, dè na rudan a th' againn ri dè an cuspair air am bhi sinn ag a' beachdachadh an uairsin air agus san t-Samhain. Bidh sinn an toiseach anns an Dàmhair
Bidh sinn a' coinneachadh coinneamhan 's a h-uile càil.
Sinn a' cleachdadh airson nan Ghàidhlig. 'S e Gàidhlig a tha Donalda MacComb às an Sgoil mi fhèin, agus mar is trice sin a' toirt a-staigh rùnaire, sianar air a' comataidh, tha còignear no riochdaire.
Robh iad a' coimhead airson robh fhios agam an uair sin gun air mar a bha cùisean agus cha aig an fhèis agus sùil a chumail deònach gu leòr suidhe a-staigh sin dh'fhaighnich i am bithinn
Mar is trice tha cóignear no sianar air a' chomataidh, tha sin a' toirt a-staigh rùnaire, mi fhéin, agus mar is trice Donalda MacComb às an Sgoil Ghàidhlígh. 'S e Gàidhlígh a tha sinn a' cleachdadh airson nan coimeanhan s-a h-uile càil.
Bhid sinn a' coineachadh an toiseach anns an Dàmhair agus san t-Samhain. Bhid sinn a' beachdachadh an uaisin air dè an cuspair air am bhi sinn ag obair, dè na rudan a th' againn ri dìthannean ro laimh.
Mar is trice bidh sinn a' faighinn taic airgid às na comhairlean fhéin agus bidh sinn ag obair cómha ri Fèisean nan Gàidheal 's bidh iadsan a' toirt airgid dhùinn. Mar is trice bidh sinn a' faighinn gu leòr airgid a-thaobh nan ticeanad cuideachd – bidh raffle againn a h-uile bliadhna agus tha sinn a’ reic airson ann na sgóiltean. Bidh gu leòr airgead againn gach bliadhna.
Chan eil coimeanadhradh againn an seo agus seach gu bheil na sgóiltean a' tìghinn a sgìrrean ann an Lannraig, Srùighlea agus Inbhir Chluaidh – tha sinn caranHashCode: 6168b8e3HashCode: 85a26ce3 sìche dè fhéin. Bhiodh a’ smeàraigh a’ tìghinn ri dhà dhaoine is a dhà dhaoine.
Chan eil coimeann a' luachd obair a th' a' fhuireadh airson cuideachd a thig a-mach gu na aon aiodh. Bha sinn a' coimhead thailte-obrach a tha thu an t-aodach 's a bhios a th' a' fhuireadh airson cuideachd, tha eil aithneach a thar 90 bliadhna.
Chan eil iad mu dha' cheud sgòiltean a' tìghinn dhan fhéis agus a' chos. Bhiodh a' airdeach airson a' seòladh a sìopa, cuideachd ri dhà dhaoine is a dhà dhaoine.
Chan eil dìud mar a tha sinne 's chein eil a' tuigsinn nach bu chòir dhaibh a bhith mar sin air an ard-ulairl – gur 'e performance' a th' ann. Tha e dreach a' córdadh riadh dhuibh.
Chan eil e foirmeil idir. Mar a thuiridh mi 's e clann a th' annata agus tha sinn ann airson 's gum bi e a' còrdadh riadh.
Tha fhios aca gu e spòrs a th' ann agus 's e sin an toilleanach a tha sinne a' faighinn às cuideachd. 'S e latha mòr a th' ann agus bidh na props agus an t-aodach agus am peant a bhios a' dol air na h-aighdeanach aca a' còrdadh riadh gu mòr.
Bhid iad a' faireachdadh gu math moiteil mu dheidhinn – an dreasa no an t-aodach coinmheach a bhios otha. Tha iad a' smaointeachadh gu bheil seo dreach m'orbhaicheadh. 'S e eichthe airson spòrs, ceol agus gàire a th' ann.
Chan ainnsa gum biodh e math nam biodh barrachd dhaoine ann a bhíreach bùthteanan-obrach dhùinn tron bhliadhna. Am bhliadhna bh' againn ri dhol timcheall a h-uile dhùine 's ag ràdh riadh. 'A bhéil thu eòlach air pàrantan a bhios airson cuideachd. Tha dhè fhios aca gur e spòrs a th' ann, am biodh e a' còrdadh riadh árainn a sheòn dh'fhaoidh iomadh rud a Sgeulachdan èibhinn?
Air an fhoilseachadh.
Tha e dìreach a' àrd-ùrlar – gur e 'performance' dhà dhaoine a bhith mar sin air an fhoradh, cha mhòr nach eil iad a' feitheamh chì thu an luchd-èisteachd, cha mhòr nach eil iad a' feitheamh chì thu an luchd-èisteachd, cha mhòr nach eil iad a' feitheamh chì thu an luchd-èisteachd, cha mhòr nach eil iad a' feitheamh chì thu an luchd-èisteachd, cha mhòr nach eil iad a' feitheamh chì thu an luchd-èisteachd, cha mhòr nach eil iad a' feitheamh chì thu an luchd-èisteachd, cha mhòr nach eil iad a' feitheamh chì thu an luchd-èisteachd, cha mhòr nach eil iad a' feitheamh chì thu an luchd-èisteachd, cha mhòr nach eil iad a' feitheamh chì thu an luchd-èisteachd, cha mhòr nach eil iad a' feitheamh chì thu an luchd-èisteachd, cha mhòr nach eil iad a' feitheamh chì thu an luchd-èisteachd, cha mhòr nach eil iad a' feitheamh chì thu an luchd-èisteachd, cha mhòr nach eil iad a' feitheamh chì thu an luchd-èisteachd, cha mhòr nach eil iad a' feitheamh chì thu an luchd-èisteachd, cha mhòr nach eil iad a' feitheamh.
MONA WILSON:
Feis Organiser
(English Summary)

I became involved in the feis by default as I worked with someone who was involved in feisean who asked me to join in. At first I thought I would just be giving support and ideas. I didn’t realise that they were looking for a producer!

There is a teacher from each participating Gaelic medium school on the committee, so committee numbers depend on who is taking part, but there are normally five or six of us. We meet first of all in October or November to decide what has to be done before the feis and we have about four or five meetings before the feis. Teachers don’t expect to get money for work they do with children. They understand that taking part is what they get out of it.

Everything is done by myself and the other teachers involved, although we do get support from Fèisean nan Gàidheal. Fèisean in the city have different problems to fèisean in the Highlands as we don’t have the same sort of community around us. We get children from schools in a wide area, from Lanarkshire, Stirling and Inverclyde.

The children that come to the feis are involved in Gaelic and drama in school before coming to the feis; they are used to performing on stage, and it is obvious that they enjoy it. We have about two hundred school children every year from five years old up to teenagers.

Everything at the feis is Gaelic, down to speaking Gaelic at meetings. The children all do Gaelic in school, so the feis ties in well with everything they are already doing.

Every year we have funny stories involving props falling, or children going on stage and waving and shouting out at parents. Things like that at the concert are all part of the fun for the parents. They enjoy it, and the audience look out for funny things happening. As the children are young, they aren’t shy in the way that adults would be on stage. The whole thing is a big event for the children. They feel proud about the costumes and make-up they get to wear, it’s an informal night for fun, music and drama.

I would like to have more support in getting people to do workshops throughout the year. It would help if there was a list of people who were willing to help with certain things, so we knew who to phone if we needed somebody just for make-up, voice projection or helping teachers with scripts. It would be good if we had stronger links with Fèisean nan Gàidheal, and groups like Tosg, the Gaelic theatre group.

My hopes for the future are just that the feis continues, that the teachers still enjoy it and are happy to be involved. I hope that the children keep getting pleasure from it and that it remains informal and fun for everyone involved, and that it continues to give parents an informal setting to meet and talk to each other. As they don’t live together in a community, the feis gives them a sense of community.

SHARON FRASER:
Chairperson

I first got involved in 2001 as a result of a School Board meeting, during which a number of parents raised issues regarding the lack of opportunities for youngsters to take part in traditional music in the area. Along with a number of other people, we tried to address that problem. We put in a successful application to the Lotteries Board and we also contacted Arthur Cormack at Fèisean nan Gàidheal. In 2002 we ran our first feis, which was incredibly successful with around forty-five children taking part. That really enthused us. We felt that we had to continue and...
I think it’s incredibly important that if you start something off then you have to create a sustainable structure.

When the Invergarry School Board was running the event, we had concentrated on a summer feis, largely led by a group of three or four on the School Board. When we were able to set up a group under the name of Fèis Ghlinn Albainn, we were able to attract additional funding specific to the aims of the feisean. Then we were able to expand our activities. We now have term-time music classes which run all year; we also have an adult feis and groupwork sessions for the older kids.

Our initial funding lasted three years and just before the period was up, I was very aware that we had to create some sort of sustainable structure so that at the end of the three years the initiative didn’t collapse. We organised a meeting and publicised this around the area. I was amazed when around thirty people turned up – I was expecting around three or four! The committee was formally constituted just after that and I have to say, it’s probably the best committee I’ve ever been involved in.

At the feis we offer classes in chanter, piping, fiddle, whistle and bodhrán. Because this area isn’t typically a Gaelic stronghold, rather than including Gaelic as a main option we’ve actually included it in the games and drama classes every morning. We’re hoping we can build on that to a point where we can offer Gaelic as a main option. Shinty, especially in Lochaber, which is a big shinty area, provides the kids with a popular third choice option.

The success of the feis for me is seeing forty youngsters from the local area having the opportunity to play musical instruments and develop an appreciation of their Gaelic culture. Prior to the feisean starting, the majority of these youngsters had no experience of traditional music, bar those who had a family member who encouraged them to play, and they were few and far between. The rurality of the area would mean that the children would have to travel to Fort William if they wanted to learn an instrument and that could be a huge commitment for the parents and cost prohibitive. We try to keep costs to a minimum to make the feis as accessible as possible and encourage young people to take part.

I think it’s incredibly important that if you start something off then you have to create a sustainable structure. That requires commitment. I want to see as many youngsters in this area have the opportunity to engage in all aspects of traditional music and Gaelic culture. The good turnout and the enthusiasm from the families keeps me going. The strong committee and their support is invaluable too. I think we drive each other on and so long as that happens, I think that we’ll want to continue and keep moving forward. As long as everyone seems positive about it, then I’m happy to keep going.

The feis for me is not just about traditional music. It’s about children developing communication skills and having an opportunity to meet new people. Probably one of the main things it does is build confidence. It’s something other than an academic
subject. I've seen some of the youngsters who may not achieve academically and maybe their self-confidence is low, but they may absolutely excel in music, so their confidence and self-esteem is raised so much through this type of activity. The whole package is equally important.

The future for me is to have a well established structure, which sees a pathway of development from grass-roots through to a level of excellence, in that we are continuing to bring children through who have never experienced music tuition before and giving them the opportunities. I would hope that through the fèis movement, we will see children going on to have a career in traditional music. Even if only one or two young people achieve that, then this has got to be worthwhile.

I believe the fèis movement has done a power of work for youngsters throughout Scotland. I think it will strengthen, and through its continuation we will see more young people in our communities playing traditional music and keeping the Gaelic culture alive – and that's very, very positive.

Fèis Cheann Loch Goibhle

Lochgoilhead 2004

This new group joined Féisean nan Gàidheal at the end of March 2004. The fèis grew out of the Lochgoilhead Fiddle Workshop group who were particularly keen to establish a programme of year-round tuition in the area. There was a move locally to do more than just fiddle workshops, and also a demand for drama and song, thus a move towards becoming a fèis.

Fèis Ghlaschu

Glasgow 2004

As part of Glasgow’s Gaelic Arts development, and funded by Glasgow City Council and An Lòchran, this brand new fèis was held during the October holidays in 2004. This first fèis attracted some funding from the Féisean nan Gàidheal Development Fund.

Fèis Ghlaschu includes music tuition, visual arts and drama workshops. The principal organisation of the fèis was subcontracted to Giant Productions on behalf of the organising committee. After this initial fèis, the committee began to move forward with plans for a second fèis, which they planned to stage in Partick Burgh Halls in April 2005.
ELAINE SPENCE:
Chairperson

Feis Lannraig a Tuath is held in Greenfaulds High School, which has the Gaelic medium unit for North Lanarkshire. In the first year we had twenty-four children, with over thirty in 2005. The children come from North Lanarkshire, Mount Cameron in East Kilbride, and Meadowburn, the Gaelic unit in Bishopbriggs. This year we have some children who are not in Gaelic medium education. The children's ages range from five to thirteen, although we would take older children if we could encourage them to become involved. We have two fifth and sixth year pupils on the committee, who help out with Gaelic tuition.

There are three main people on the committee and the numbers can vary from four to ten people at meetings. Everyone who helps with the feis is a volunteer. Personally, I first became involved in the feis through involvement in the Crolleagan and Sgoil Anraich in Airdrie and went along to a feis meeting as a first-aider to give my views on child safety.

The final week's preparation before the feis is very hectic, organising classes and timetables, but once the children come in, everything runs smoothly. We work in partnership with North Lanarkshire Council, who help with paper work, and were fortunate in receiving an 'Awards For All' grant from the Lottery. We feel that it is very important to have good communication and a strong relationship with Feisean nan Gàidheal.

Within the feis programme, everyone must pick either Gaelic singing or drama as their first choice, and they can also choose from penny whistle, guitar, clarsach, drums, arts and crafts and shinty. We have found that none of the boys want to do Gaelic singing! We have a ceilidh at the end of the week for the children to perform what they have learnt throughout the week.

We try to use Gaelic all day, and encourage the children not to use any English at all. We will have a few beginners this year but will encourage them to use and to pick up as much Gaelic as possible. The children seem to respond better to using the language in the feis, as it is being used in an everyday setting. I have even noticed that the level of Gaelic in my house increased as my son was using it a lot more. Last year, we had four Canadian children over on holiday who didn’t have a word of Gaelic, but by the end of the week they could recite their lines, and they had a great time.

We would like to see the feis grow steadily in the future. We have fundraising ideas such as T-shirts and logos to promote the feis. We would like to have classes in October for High School children, a special project involving either media or computers, and perhaps get a folk group up and running. We hope that the feis will help improve on this and encourage the children to know about their culture, which goes hand in hand with the language.
What you have to do is use a situation to do what you want to do, and that’s what we’ve done. If you go to the right person, you’ll get the right answer.

CHAS MACDONALD: Secretary and Administrator

We wanted to make our fèis Gaelic and Scots, because the two languages are here. One of the difficulties a Gaelic development officer had in a neighbouring local authority was that the councillors would say ‘there’s no Gaelic here’, so politically I thought it would be wiser to put the two together and negate that argument, which has worked quite well.

For a long time, I have felt that both languages had to work together as the two languages of Scotland, so it is an area of cross-over.

Stirling, Falkirk and Clackmannan used to be a part of Central Region before the change in local government split it into three unitary authorities. It’s very difficult to think of the three areas as separate entities so it seemed wiser to work across the three authorities.

We decided to call it ‘Fèis in the Middle’, Fèis ‘s a Mheadhan or Fest o’ the Mids.

We had our first fèis in October 2004 in Wallace High in Stirling. From there I wanted to go to Clackmannanshire, but 80-90% of the participants came from Callander, so we went there for our second one. Then we went to Falkirk, which was part of the Youth Music Initiative (YMI). Next year we’re going to Clackmannan with other events in the area. There will be three fèisean a year.
We do Gaelic and Scots song and language classes and we’ve just added shinty to the basic fèis. We have a development plan for the period 2005 to 2010 which will add a mountain of activity onto that. The plan is to build it up into a wider cultural festival in a bigger community.

In a large urban area, everything is hidden unless you go looking for it. It’s difficult to read the community reaction to it. The council have become a lot more sympathetic to you, then that’s what we’ve done. If you go to the right person, you’ll get the right answer.

We have exactly the national average of Gaelic speakers in our area and there’s a Gaelic unit in the primary school in Stirling. There are several Gaelic organisations, so there’s already a small constituency and a knowledge of Gaelic, so you don’t have to push too much.

We’ve got something like 150-200,000 people in our catchment area. Some won’t take any notice. If you’ve got 1.9% of the population who are sympathetic to you, then that’s 4,000 people. You’ve already got a natural constituency anywhere and all you have to do is tap into them.

If I wanted to do this, say, in Arisaig, you would basically have to get the whole community behind you, whereas in Stirling that would be unmanageable.

In an average week I probably spend around 15 to 20 hours on the fèis, but that’s primarily because I choose to and I try to keep things high quality because we want to build this, so it takes a lot of time. It’s a big part of my life.

Having a Highland mentality, I enjoy the social aspects of the fèis. I like the fact that you can bring everyday people together with well-known tutors, and you can help them pass tradition onto kids, and it gives them the best tuition they can get and motivates them to go on. When parents stop and say ‘my daughter loves that song, she hasn’t stop singing it since the fèis, she’s desperate to go again, when’s the next one?’ – what more do you want?

At the closing cèilidh of the fèis you feel that sense of achievement that they’ve got. It’s that knowledge that you’ve taken children who had none of that 48 hours ago to be able to perform something, and at least get an enjoyment out of it, so there’s a draw to it for them.

If I’ve found one thing about advertising, it’s that it’s completely accidental. It’s all about who happens to be looking, where you’ve placed the advert and when they’re looking. You basically have to go out there and tell them. The Gaelic language is about face-to-face interaction and so are the fèisean. It’s about showing that it’s fun and interesting. That’s where we want to go. That’s my goal.

In a large urban area, everything is hidden unless you go looking for it. It’s difficult to read the community reaction to it.
I am employed part time as a Highland Council Arts Officer. In 2002 Friends of Highland Music asked me if I could use a £5,000 Awards for All grant to promote traditional music in the Nairn Area. My own kids grew up in Ross & Cromarty and had been greatly inspired by Fèis Rois, so I was immediately encouraged to test drive something similar in Nairn. I grew up in Ross & Cromarty and had been greatly inspired by Fèis Rois, so I was immediately encouraged to test drive something similar in Nairn as there was no real opportunity for young folk to hear or play traditional music. So we used the funding to invite Croft No. Five along to give every pupil in Primary 5 a taster session in whistle, percussion, guitar, fiddle and accordion and also a chance to hear the band play.

The pupils had a great time and the feedback was extremely positive. We invited the pupils to apply for a further three lessons in an instrument of their choice and around 80 children attended, so I advertised a public meeting open to anyone who wished to see provision of permanent classes in Nairn. A group of 20 adults and children turned up and I thought ‘Great, we have the beginnings of a Nairn Fèis!’ But I had to pull back – not one person had heard of the Fèisean movement! Everyone was very keen for the Arts Officer to introduce traditional music classes but I knew it was essential that a féis is community based.

We formed a small committee and for the next couple of years we ran weekly classes in fiddle, accordion and guitar and also an experimental, féis style weekend attended by 100 people. The committee members learned more about the benefits of the Fèisean movement and by April 2005, we were delighted to join under the Fèisean nan Gàidheal umbrella as Fèis Inbhir Narainn.

Having established a raft of weekly classes and wishing also to run an annual Féis, the committee needed more consistent support that I could offer as a part time arts officer. With a funding package from Leader+, The Highland Council, Awards for All and Fèisean nan Gàidheal, a part-time co-ordinator post was advertised to help consolidate what had been achieved and put Fèis Inbhir Narainn on a more permanent footing. Fèisean nan Gàidheal assisted the committee with the recruitment procedure and I applied for an interview. I was so delighted to be offered the post (five days a month) as I really enjoy working with the local committee.

One of the main aims of the post is to put in place the infrastructure to make Fèis Inbhir Narainn sustainable beyond the current two years funding. We need to decide, as a committee, what our ambitions are, consider how best to introduce more Gaelic and apply for appropriate funding. We’re currently exploring becoming a company limited by guarantee and applying for charitable status to open up new funding sources.

It is important to us to generate enthusiasm in our own area. Most of our participants are young people aged 9 years plus but we also have a small percentage of adult learners. As long as we have a minimum of six adults, the classes pay for themselves. The first time we ran a weekend event we billed it as a family event and the classes were very mixed. Now we offer beginner and improver classes for children and adults. Participants can come on a whole weekend ticket or just buy into a day or evening. This participation helps at registration etc. We also enjoy strong links with Nairn Gaelic Choir and Còroleagan Inbhir Narainn.

We’re in the middle of a drive to attract new members. Of course, many folk have offered support without wishing to be on the committee and their help is invaluable too – selling raffle tickets helping at registration etc. We also enjoy strong links with Nairn Gaelic Choir and Còroleagan Inbhir Narainn. Together we can help raise the profile of Gaelic in the Nairn Area and keep interest in traditional music and culture alive and kicking.

SHONA ARTHUR
Fèis Co-ordinator

My kids...had been greatly inspired by Fèis Rois, so I was immediately encouraged to test drive something similar in Nairn...
NIKI ROBERTSON:  
Co-ordinator  
I have two daughters, who were keen to learn some instruments. I was fortunate in knowing Ingrid Henderson, the local fèis development worker, who was very helpful and suggested that we set up some new classes. Feis nan Garbh-Chrìochan were running a few classes here already, but demand was growing, so we decided to have a go at running a few classes ourselves. With Ingrid’s help, we got a few people together and set up a new committee.  

We started off in April 2004 with a guitar class and some clàrsach classes and that’s how it got going really. We put a note in the local newspaper Westword and we let people know through the schools as well. Quite a lot of people came along, about 15 parents, so we set up a committee.  

The first main event was in November 2005. We did have some smaller events and specialist weekends before that but the main fèis was in 2005. The participants all came from the communities of Mallaig, Morar and Arisaig. So we started quite small. The age group for the main event was 8 to 18 years, and we also held some ‘come-and-try’ Gaelic fun days for children aged 5 to 8 years. That was great, it was a mixture of basic Gaelic language, art and music. There were quite a few wee ones that went to those.  

At the main fèis I think we had about 25 participants, which was quite good for our first event. We’re quite lucky in that there are a number of tutors who live locally, but we also had tutors from Skye and Edinburgh. We encourage the tutors to use Gaelic as much as possible, and have guitar, chanter, fiddle and clàrsach among the main subjects.  

We’ve now taken over the running of all the ongoing classes in this area from Feis nan Garbh-Chrìochan and that doubles the work we have to do! So we’re just hoping to promote it more, to encourage people to take part in the main fèis, and we hope that it will grow from here.  

...and so the movement goes on, like beacon after beacon blazing out from the hills...and the strange thing about it is its spontaneity. No highbrow group of intellectuals could ever have engineered it...but something beyond their wildest dreams has come straight out of the hearts of the people. What has really happened, is that people have suddenly realized the value of their own local traditions. The movement will spread. It will... generate a spirit of self-help that will save the north west counties from social and economic decay...then shall we behold the passing of a dark age and the dawning of a bright new era in Scotland...  

Power,1931 quoted in MacNeil, 1968
Fèisean nan Gàidheal is the membership organisation of the fèis movement. Set up in 1989, it is a company limited by guarantee with charitable status and a board of directors. The organisation offers professional support, funding, training, and insurance to member groups, and carries out disclosure checks on behalf of all fèisean. Since 1995 a key function of the organisation has been the dispersal of funds to local fèisean on behalf of the Scottish Arts Council and local authorities. Fèisean nan Gàidheal represents local communities in helping to shape national Gaelic policies, and has established good communication networks through a website, newsletters and local fieldworkers. In 2003, the organisation’s director, Arthur Cormack, was appointed as a member of Bòrd na Gàidhlig, set up by the Scottish Executive to advise on Gaelic matters and lead Gaelic development through a National Plan for Gaelic.

This chapter outlines the formation and growth of Fèisean nan Gàidheal from its establishment in 1989 to the present day. In the first section, contributions are included from Malcolm MacLean, Gaelic Arts Officer, Duncan MacLeod and John MacDonald.
as the first chairmen of the organisation, and board member Jim Morrison, former Principal Officer of Community Education with Highland Council. The second part of the chapter is made up of contributions from Feis na Gàidheal staff, discussing their experience of and roles within the organisation and views on the feis.

Feis na Gàidheal was formed at a meeting organised by Pròiseact nan Ealan (PnE) in Erbusaig, near Plockton in March, 1989. The meeting attracted twenty delegates from seven festivals, two local Mods and two of the key arts agencies in the Highlands and Islands, Eden Court Theatre and An Lanntair Gallery. Highland Regional Council was represented by Gaelic Officer Donald John MacLeod and three Community Education staff, with Chris Higgins representing the HIDB. A steering group was appointed from this first meeting comprising Duncan MacLeod, administrator of the Celtic Film Festival, Malcolm MacLean, Gaelic Arts Officer, who had organised the conference, John MacDonald and Kate Martin, Community Education staff in Skye and Wester Ross respectively, and Bryan Beattie, Arts Officer, Ross & Cromarty District Council. The steering group was given the task of working on a constitution for the organisation and it was agreed that PnE would carry out the administration for the group. A press release in April 1989 reported that:

‘the growing number of Gaelic festivals throughout the Highlands and Islands would work together to share resources, develop ways of publicising and marketing the festivals more effectively and lobby funding and policy-making bodies for increased support.’

In this press release, the term ‘movement’ in relation to the feis was first used:

The festivals movement continues to grow at a remarkable rate and the time is ripe to take this further step of establishing supportive links between the events.

MALCOLM MACLEAN:
Gaelic Arts Officer

For me, the origins of Feis na Gàidheal came from visiting people who represented the different feis. Around 1987–88, I was meeting with people from Feis Bharraigh, Feis Rois and Feis Tìr a’ Mhuraín, for example Chrissie Mackinnon, Kate Martin and Mairi Bhì. I think there were the only three tuition feis at that time; three completely different models, in three different communities, which all had remarkable affinities. They were all trying to do the same thing, with variations on the same theme. I realised that we could develop this in a range of different ways. Local communities could put their own stamp on a feis, and were clearly beginning to do so. So
that first stage, for me, was about finding out what was going on. The next significant step towards doing something collectively was the meeting we held near Plockton, at the Tingle Creek Hotel. That was the beginning of Fèisean nan Gàidheal. We invited together for the first time everybody who was involved in running a fèis: a number of people who were interested in the idea and also some festivals that already existed as performance festivals and were curious about building in a tuition element, for example Feis Ìle.

It was Tormod Calum (Norman MacDonald) the playwright, who was our Writer in Residence at that time who named Fèisean nan Gàidheal. When it came to deciding what name it should have, Tormod Calum said ‘call it Fèisean nan Gàidheal’, and that’s where it came from.

At that time it seemed that there were two different kinds of fèisean: one was a community-based performance festival and the other was the tuition festival, mainly for children. So the idea of a ‘féis’, a term which up until then would have been used to cover any kind of Gaelic festival, and still is, became more focused towards a tuition festival for young people. At that point it became clear that there was a real degree of energy building up behind that use of the term, and it was agreed that an association could be formed which would act as an umbrella body for these different organisations.

From that meeting came the clarification of the context, the name of the organisation and a group of people mandated to progress it. Over the next two to three years we held meetings, brought in other fèisean and saw other fèisean emerge, enough to know that there was something significant there.

We progressively moved towards a constitution and a three-year development plan, and put the funding in place for the development plan. We organised annual general meetings so that the fèisean were brought together regularly to share what was going on and be updated on any wider developments that might be useful to them.

We worked on setting it up as a company, writing the memorandum and articles which detailed how the organisation would work, taking that to an AGM to have it agreed. There was all of that going on and given the lack of money that was around at the time, it was a slow process.

Initially, not everyone agreed with having an umbrella organisation, arguing that it would homogenise local diversity in individual areas, so there was a degree of addressing these concerns and deciding what sort of things the organisation could do. We were able to take ideas back to open meetings of the fèisean and say ‘here’s an outline of the remit for an organisation, here’s some of the things an organisation could do collectively’ – we identified things like insurance, joint publicity, a tutor directory and so on.

Because people were wary about losing their own autonomous identities, it had to be talked through carefully. And so the debate opened up. We had discussions around the format and the purpose of the organisation and in constitutional terms what it should be – should it be a limited company or have some other form of constitution? There were important meetings, held in Bonar Bridge, in Tulloch Castle, in Dingwall and in Stornoway in the Council Chambers in 1991. That was the meeting where the company was formed: Fèisean nan Gàidheal
Many other places now want to start a fèis, and much of the talk at the meeting was about the desirability of publishing an information manual on how to set up a fèis.

Feisean nan Gàidheal was formally constituted at a general meeting on Tuesday 26 February 1991 in Comhairle nan Eilean Council Chambers, Stornoway. In 1990, Frank Rennie had been employed by Pròiseact nan Ealan as a project worker to help get the initiative under way. By late 1991 Frank reported:

Considerable interest is being expressed by rural communities in running their own féis; from 4, two years ago, there are 16 this year and possibly 22 in 1992.

By 1992, a tutors’ directory had been compiled detailing 100 tutors willing to help with féisean, and five training workshops had been held. The first was in Ullapool and involved tutors in sharing ideas and experience, and setting out terms for good practice in teaching. Three further ‘pre-féis’ training workshops were then held in Golspie, Ross and North Uist where tutors could be introduced to the aims of each féis and discuss strategies for Gaelic and collaborative group work. A fifth workshop was held in Bonar Bridge in Autumn 1991, with representatives of each féis, in order to prepare a three-year strategic plan, and was combined with a meeting with the new Traditional Music Working Party of the SAC. As a result of discussions with STV, funding was secured for Feis Bharraigh and Feisean nan Gàidheal over two years. Meetings with the HIDB and Highland Regional
Council contributed to the establishment of a strategic plan outlining the need for a full-time development worker, office base and resources to support the increasing number of member organisations. A poster-calendar of fèisean and the commissioning of a ‘start-up guide for fèisean’ were among plans for early 1992.

Tom McGrath, as part of his HI Light commissioned investigation into the social impact of the arts, attended a Fèisean nan Gàidheal meeting in Benbecula during 1991:

Fèisean nan Gàidheal’s poster for this year lists fèisean in Plockton, Ullapool, Islay, Tiree, North Uist, Golspie, South Uist, Stornoway, Gairloch and Fort Augustus. Many other places now want to start a fèis, and much of the talk at the meeting was about the desirability of publishing an information manual on how to set up a fèis. Informing people so that they can help themselves is a cornerstone of this movement. Finance was also under discussion. With each separate fèis making calls on financial support from a number of different public agencies, the situation was becoming complicated.

DONNCHADH MACLEòID:
A’ chiad chathraiche aig Fèisean nan Gàidheal
Aig an àm aig an robhas a’ coinheadh ri ciamar a dheidheadh rianachd nam fèisean a chur air dòigh, bha mi nam stiùriric air Comunn Film agus Telebhisean nan Dùthchannan Ceilteach, stèidhichte ann an Inbhir Nis. Bhruidhinn Calum MacAileachain, Pròiseact nan Ealan, rium mu dheidhinn Fèisean nan Gàidheal. Dh’fhàighnich e dè am beachd a bh’ agam air sùidheachadh nam fèisean. Bha mi gu làidir dhen bheachd gun robh làn às ann rud a chur air dòigh airson na fèisean a thoirt air a’ thoir gu nàiseanta mar bhuidheann. Bha mi airson gum biodh structar ann a bhiodh nàiseanta anns am biodh beachdan a’ tigheann bho na daoine a bha a’ ruth nam fèisean air leith. Bhruidhinn mi fhéin ’s Calum air an dòigh a b’ fhéarr air seo a dheanamh agus dh’ aontaich sin ann am farsaingeachd dè dh’fheumtadh dèanamh.

Dh’fhoghlaimh Calum rium an robh mi deònach ann obair a dheanamh. Thuit mi gu robh mi deònach le huiseachadh bon bhuidheann aige fhéin. Chaidh a’ chiad choineamh airson rìochдаirean bhao na fèisean air leth air chois ann an taigh-òsta ann an Earbasàig taobh a-againn Cal Loch Allsce. D’h-obraich a’ choineamh anns math dha-rìbh. Nise thàinig rìochdairean bhon Chomunn Ghàidhealach ann ach bhon a bha iadsan an sàs, ann an obair co-cheangailte ri fàrpaìsachd ann an ceòl den h-uile seòrsa, cha do shaol iad gum biodh an rud ur cho rianachd dhaibhson a bhith an sàs ann. Mar sin tharraing An Comunn Gàidhealach as mar chomunn.

Ach dh’aontaich an fheadhainn eile a thàinig crùin a dholl air adhart le adhartas a theoirt air an t-sùidheachadh. ’S aon aig an òm sin a chaidh iarradh ormsa a bhith anns a’ chathair air a bhith a’ thoir gu nàiseanta a bha a’ dol a chur an rud air adhart. Bha e gle fhollaiseach gun robh uaidh mhòr aig na rìochdairean ann a bhith a’ toirt an obair a bha iad fhèin a’ déanamh anns gach sgìre air adhart.

Bha duilgheadasan co-cheangailte ri sin agus ma ghabhas mi orm a ràdh ’s e aon dhiu sin, gun a bhith eas-uiramach ann an dòigh bith, nach robh uimhir de dh’ eòlas aig moran dhe na bha ann, air obair comataidh aige ire nàiseanta. Bha iad fhèin air leth mothaileach air gur dòcha
gun robh eabhsbaidh orra anns an t-seadh sin. Bha mise air a bhith ag obair ann an rud no dhà aig an ire sin. Bha mi airson miseadh a thoradh dhialbhs is gun tugadh thad is nach robh easbhaidh sam bith orra is gu faodadh iad am beachdan a chuir air adhart agus sin a dhéanamh ann an dòigh a bha rianail, ordaid, dòghcheil, ceart. Cheibheadh a h-ule deaine air a bheachd fhéin a chuir air adhart agus gun robh mise déonach gu làir a bhidean agus ceart a bh' aig freumh a h-ule caill a bh' ann. As aonais a chanain agus am mothaichadh a bhith againn air cho cogail 's a bha suidheadachd a chainn, nach fhoadaidh sinn a' dhol glè fhada air adhart gun a bhith a toirt iad gu math ard dhan a chanain anns a h-ule caill a bh' ann. Nise, ma tha mho chuimhne-sa ceart, aig an ire sin, cha robh na feisean air leath a' toirt iad a bh' annas mar dheanadh lathair agus mar chuspair taobh a-staigh nam feisean idir. Cha robh a' Ghaidhlig a' faighinn iad den ts-eòrsa sin idir a bh' airt aig an fhèadheidh a bha a' rith nam feisean air gun deidheadh sin a dhéanamh agus bha coomas math dha-ribh ag feadhainn aca a thaobh a' chainn agus an coinhearsnachd – bha i gu tur nan duachas. Air a' làimh eile bha feadhainn ann nach b' urrainn sin a ràdh idir aig an robh eolas air a' cheol, aig an robh eolas air dé a th' ann iad a' cheol taobh a-staigh a h-ule caill a bha iad a' cur air adhart.

Tha mi gu ladir dhèn bheachd nach b' ann airson a' Ghaidhlig a chaidh a' chridh fhéis a cuir air adhart idir. B' ann dràdh a thaobh cùil, a thaobh amhrain agus sin a bh' eanacht a thaobh cothrom a thòirt dhan àirighd a bhith blasad air duachas, air na h-earannain sin den duachas a bh' eaidheichte air ceol agus sin fhads a bhiodh iad a' cheòl a bh' aig a' chànan dhan rud. B' ann mar sin a bha a' chais agus nach robh cleachdadh a' chànan dhi fhéin a' tighinn a-steach dhan rud idir. S' e sin am beachd agamsa. Nise, chan ann a' geanain a tha mi a' rìur a' chusaidh a bha iad a' stèidheachadh a' chànan dhi fhéin a' tighinn a-steach dhan rud idir. S' e sin am beachd agamsa. Nise, chan ann a' geanain a tha mi a' rìur a' chusaidh a bha iad a' stèidheachadh a' chànan dhi fhéin a' tighinn a-steach dhan rud idir.
All through the time of my involvement I felt that the fèis was one of the best youth movements I had come across.
quite different; the majority were week-long events; Feis Rois split into three different age groups. Where there was a Gaelic-medium school, people saw having a Feis as a natural extension of the school and a way to expand the activities of the school into the community. It was really the growth of Gaelic medium schools that spurred on the development of the Feisean, particularly in other parts of Scotland. People saw it as a good model for involving young people and encouraging them to think about their own culture, their own music, and the value of that. It’s a model that has been used in different parts of Scotland, for example the Gaitherin’ is a similar event in the Gordon area of Aberdeenshire which promotes the Doric culture. In Skye, sports coaching has used a similar model in running a week-long school, and encouraging children to try less familiar sports, as well as those they are already used to playing.

As the Feis movement was growing I could see that it was becoming more established and it was quite rewarding being able to play a role in that. But with Council procedures, legislation and so on, there are issues about council officers being closely involved in specific voluntary organisations, so eventually it seemed time to pass the chairmanship to someone else. I felt that there were other ways I could support Feisean nan Gaidheal within the Council.

JIM MORRISON:
Former Principal Officer, Community Education Service, Highland Regional Council

Looking at how the movement had emerged, it seemed particularly appropriate to the Highland area, and it was also particularly appropriate that our workers were becoming involved in something that concerned language and culture through work with young people. I remember going to a Feisean nan Gaidheal conference in Bonar Bridge and realising that about seven or eight of our Community Education workers were actively involved in setting up and supporting Feisean across the Highlands. I became a member of the Feisean nan Gaidheal Board from then until I retired, and even afterwards while working for the Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council. I also thought it was particularly relevant that the Feisean should be involved in international exchanges. We did an exchange between Feis Bharraigh and Tonga in the Pacific Islands – it was a fascinating exchange based on two island cultures based on a theme of the influence of the sea on their island cultures.

I also did some work with Feisean nan Gaidheal on child protection, and supported their development as an organisation concerned with work with young people. All through the time of my involvement I felt that the Feisean were one of the best youth movements I had come across.

I remember being on the interview panel that appointed Arthur Cormack to the job of Feisean nan Gaidheal director; I think Arthur has done an absolutely wonderful job. I never cease to be amazed how far the movement has developed; also it’s interesting to see how many leading musicians and dancers in Scotland are ex-feis participants. It’s had a unique influence, as far as I’m concerned. For a person who travels as much as I do and sees young people participating in cultural activities abroad, I think it’s brilliant that you come here – for example Feis Rois are performing for visitors on a boat, or at The Ceilidh.
The strength of it is that it belongs to the community ... it is a community-based activity and that is a huge strength of the movement.

Place in Ullapool or wherever. The tourists absolutely adore it, they think it’s wonderful. Individual fèisean were involved in the International Festival of Music and Dance which we held every year in Highland, building on international youth exchanges carried out as part of our youth work strategy. During the year of the Arts in 1991, we had a Celtic Festival of Music and Dance, where we brought together young people from all the Celtic nations, including the fèisean from Scotland, for performances around Highland region with a final concert in Eden Court; that was an outstanding success.

For a while there was substantial difficulty over funding; it was very difficult to convince every local authority. We didn’t have too many problems in Highland, but I was amazed that some authorities couldn’t see the benefits, although I think that’s improved now. Fèisean in Highland have certainly benefited from the support of community work staff. We had certain full-time staff in Highland who had a remit to promote Gaelic, so initiating and supporting a local fèis was seen as part of their duties, and it was quite a commitment.

I think the fèisean in Highland really expanded because of the involvement of Community Education staff in the establishment of several local fèisean, for example Fèis Rois, Fèis an Earraich, Fèis Chataibh, Fèis Spè, Fèis nan Garbh-Chrochan, Fèis Lochabair, Fèis na h-Oige. They were able to network and share information, and Community Education Service in Highland had a Gaelic working group which enabled this to happen. Staff who were trained in working with communities, in working with young people, were able to support the establishment of local organisations, to access funding and help with the initial administration of the fèis. I think that was a significant contribution.

The quality of the tutors that the fèisean manage to attract always amazed me, and the fact that many will charge quite a reasonable sum, and not overcharge – in fact they do exactly the opposite. To organise a week’s tuition, that’s a lot for volunteers; it involves a lot of fundraising. The nature of the Highlands and Islands often means residential events, which is even more expensive. So that’s not an easy thing for a voluntary organisation to do. The other thing that’s built up now is weekly support, and that costs money too. Some of the fèisean work in quite small communities, where it is not altogether easy to raise money, so I’m full of admiration for them. The fèisean need money to sustain ongoing classes too, if you’re going to move young people on, in whatever it is, they need to have regular classes, not just one burst per year, and funding has to be available for that. It’s the money to do that that’s essential. I think local authorities should accept that this is part of education and it can be less expensive by employing people in the community. The strength of it is that it belongs to the community – if you make it compulsory or even semi-compulsory, it takes that away; it is a community-based activity and that is a huge strength of the movement.
The first Ceòl nam Fèis Concert as a showcase of the fèis movement was staged in Eden Court Theatre, Inverness in January 1996, with 120 children from 15 fèisean taking part before an enthusiastic audience. A second Ceòl nam Fèis was to have taken place in January 1998 at Celtic Connections in Glasgow, but plans by the host agency to support the involvement of over 100 young participants were not sufficiently advanced to allow this to take place. Instead, a second highly successful Eden Court concert was mounted in June 1998.

That year, 2,700 young people took part in 26 fèisean, employing over 400 tutors. The total cost of running all 26 fèisean was approaching a quarter of a million pounds, of which just under half was raised by local fèisean.
A very successful Féis Alba took place in Portree, Skye, from 5th to 9th July 1999, attended by 42 participants. Financial support came from Féisean nan Gàidheal, the SAC National Lottery New Directions fund, HIE and Highland Council. The fèis also attracted large audiences to the performances and traditional music sessions held at the Aros Centre.

Aimed at advanced level 16-25 year olds from all over Scotland, Féis Alba was set up as a separate company in 1998. The fèis involves a series of master classes, workshops and concerts, involving performance and group work skills, guidance on using sound equipment and business advice.

Suggestions for Féis Alba had arisen as early as 1991. A ‘Sgoil Shamhradh’ for teenage participants was first mooted, then an ‘Àrd-fèis’ for advanced participants. Féis directors were not in complete agreement about the idea however. After much discussion it was agreed that an event would be held in Ross & Cromarty in 1992, which might include adult learners, have an age group of 16+, and would include a range of tutors’ workshops too. The name ‘Fèis nan Inbhich’ was proposed rather than ‘Àrd-fèis’. One of the arguments was that the féisean were about regenerating local traditions and culture rather than providing a third level of training, although it was recognised that this was badly needed in Scotland, as the nearest place to study traditional Celtic music to degree level was in Ireland. There was concern too, that an ‘àrd-fèis’ or ‘superféis’ as it was nicknamed, might detract from the work of the local féisean, placing them in a secondary position in terms of quality or attractiveness to young people, which might reduce some of the benefits the féisean were demonstrating in strengthening communities.

By 1996, the idea was back on the table. Other organisations, Pròiseact nan Ealan and An Comunn Gàidhealach were also considering plans for such an event, and came together to discuss a joint festival. A feasibility study was carried out by Bryan Beattie in 1997, resulting in the submission of proposals and funding applications for a new initiative which finally emerged as Féis Alba. In December 1997, David Boag was appointed as organiser of the project, in a post part-funded by Skye and Lochalsh Enterprise as a graduate placement. The first event took place in June 1998 in Portree, with a plan for the project to move to a different area each year. The project developed gradually with perhaps smaller numbers than anticipated as the target age group was 16-25, an age group which tends to leave the Highlands and Islands for further or higher education and for employment. As the fèis was held during the summer, it risked conflicting with potential participants’ vacation employment. With steady perseverance however, Féis Alba has achieved what it set out to do. In 2005, the fèis took a new direction in training the Cèilidh Trail participants from Féis Rois, Féis an Earraich and Féis Chataibh, giving each group the necessary musical and performance skills prior to their summer employment as musicians in each area.
The fèisean are widely recognised as one of the most successful community arts initiatives in Scotland, some would say Europe.

By the year 2000, Fèisean nan Gàidheal were able to employ four regionally-based fèis support workers: Ingrid Henderson, Rachel Walker, Jennifer Marshall and Lena MacLellan. In Fèisean nan Gàidheal’s Annual Report for that year John MacDonald wrote:

During the course of the Gaelic Education debate in the Scottish Parliament on 3 March, seven of the nine MSPs who spoke, praised the fèis movement, and called for greater support for it. The output from the fèis movement from a relatively small investment is immense, and our situation is in contrast to that of our sister organisation in Ireland – Cómhaltas Ceóiltoiri na h-Eireann – with which we have established links. The Irish Government directly grants £200,000 to Cómhaltas annually; given the links that the Scottish Executive seem very keen to promote and foster between Scotland and Ireland, it is hoped that they will take a leaf out of the Irish Government’s book, and ensure our work is recognised, and its future development secured with appropriate funding. The fèisean are widely recognised as one of the most successful community arts initiatives in Scotland, some would say Europe.

The organisation’s website at www.fèisean.org was redesigned in 2000, reaching a global audience with information and news about member fèisean. Highlights of 2000 included a third successful Ceòl nam Fèis in January, recorded for subsequent broadcast by Mòinéal Television. This company, funded by Comaisaidh Craolaidh Gàidhlig also filmed Feis Rois and Feis na h-Oige for a documentary about the fèis movement shown in December 2000, which helped to raise the public
5. fèis fèisean nan gàidheal

Louise Mackenzie, the Traditional Music Co-ordinator for Skye and Lochalsh, was based in the Portree Office from 2000 to 2005, running An Drochaid – the Skye & Lochalsh Traditional Music Project, which Fèisean nan Gàidheal managed on behalf of Skye & Lochalsh Enterprise. Fraser Shaw also joined the staff on a work placement from YouthLink Scotland, successfully completing the Foundation level of his BA in Community and Informal Education in May 2000.

In 2001, John MacDonald, Fèisean nan Gàidheal Chairman reported:

The fèisean continue to be highly regarded as a model of good practice. The National Cultural Strategy for Scotland published last year highlighted the fèis movement as a case study, and this has translated into additional financial support for the movement, which has allowed us to increase the percentage grant offered to fèisean.

The employment of the fèis support workers and the activity they have stimulated has resulted in the largest number of year-round activities yet supported through Fèisean nan Gàidheal. It is clear that their help may be breaking the glass ceiling on development that was experienced by volunteer burn-out.

Two decades since the first Fèis began on the island of Barra, the fèis movement looks set to stay at the forefront of traditional Gaelic music development. Here’s to the next twenty years!

Meanbh-chuileag

The Meanbh-chuileag Theatre-in-Education Company project began in July 2002 as a one-year pilot to determine the demand for Gaelic theatre in schools. The group of three – Màiri Kidd, Douglas Beck and Donald William Stewart – were all tutors for Fèis Dhùn Èideann, who had the idea of developing a theatre group that could go into schools in Edinburgh to promote the work of the fèis and encourage new participants to come along.

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MAIRI KIDD:
*Meanbh-chuileag*

For the past few years I’ve been involved with the Gaelic theatre-in-education company, ‘Meanbh-chuileag’, meaning ‘Midge’ which started in 2000. It grew from a Fèis Dhùn Èideann project, where three teachers went around schools in the area doing workshops to give the children a taster of Gaelic and Gaelic culture. Schools then asked us to return and do plays on subjects such as the Jacobites and the Clearances, as they didn’t feel qualified to do this themselves. We got funding initially from the Celtic Society at Edinburgh University, Fèisean nan Gàidheal, and Lloyds TSB’s Trust Fund for Scotland. When Meanbh-chuileag became a full-time enterprise it was the Scottish Arts Council, Fèisean nan Gàidheal, Lloyds TSB, and Iomairt Chalum Chille that funded it. Meanbh-chuileag works mainly to take the work that the fèisean do into schools that might not otherwise benefit from them, as not every part of the country has a fèis. It also brings the fèisean into formal education.

The years 2004-05 continued to be a very busy year for the Meanbh-chuileag Theatre-in-Education Company, with more than 250 individual workshop sessions completed and with more than 3,500 individuals taking part. Fèisean nan Gàidheal were successful in securing funds from the Scottish Arts Council and Bòrd na Gàidhlig to continue the work of Meanbh-chuileag and embark on a new Gaelic language development project from 1st April 2005. The company’s early-years’ play *Biorachan Beag agus Biorachan Mòr* was performed in East Renfrewshire, Renfrewshire, Inverclyde, and the Western Isles. A valuable accompaniment to the play came in November 2004 with the publication of the Gaelic/Scots children’s book *Biorachan Beag agus Biorachan Mòr – Big Tappietoorie an’ Wee Tappietoorie*. The book has been highly acclaimed, and is selling well in bookshops across Scotland. Meanbh-chuileag became a contractor for Historic Scotland/The National Trust for Scotland’s ‘After the Battle’, a project in which upper primary pupils explore the joint history of the Culloden and Fort George sites. Meanbh-chuileag devised an original play for the project exploring the effect of the ‘45 on Gaelic culture, and produced an education pack on the same theme. November saw the first Fèisean nan Gàidheal activity in Orkney with a Meanbh-chuileag tour of The Seal Wife to schools all over the islands, including Papa Westray – which took the group on the shortest scheduled flight in the world! The well-established link with Kaimes Special School in Edinburgh was maintained with a three-day visit including a performance of the History of the Highlands and arts workshops.
The year 2002-03 was again a significant time for Fèisean nan Gàidheal. Following the three highly successful Ceòl nam Fèis concerts staged at Eden Court Theatre, Inverness, it was decided to hold four regionally based concerts in 2002. These took place in Oban, Dingwall, Fort William and Benbecula, organised by the fèis support workers and co-ordinated by musical directors Maggie MacInnes, Kathleen Boyle, Phil Cunningham and Brian Ò hEadhra. Over the series of concerts, 400 young people performed to audiences totalling over 1,000.

In August 2003, Jim Wallace MSP, Deputy First Minister announced that Highlands and Islands Enterprise were providing a new funding package of £180,000 to Fèisean nan Gàidheal, to help them deliver a wider range of services and to match funding already provided by the Scottish Arts Council. Together with enhanced funding from Highland Council and the European Social Fund, Fèisean nan Gàidheal’s finances were put on a more secure footing. After the announcement, the Minister was treated to some Gaelic song and instrumental sets from Deidre Graham, Fiona MacAskill and Iseabail Strachan of Feis an Earrach.

By 2003, support worker Jennifer Marshall left to go to Japan and Christine MacIntyre was appointed as worker for Argyll and Strathclyde. Rachel Walker left to work with Lochaber College and Ingrid Henderson became Lochaber’s full-time development worker, while Fiona MacInnes had taken over from Lena MacLellan as support worker in the Western Isles.

That year, in line with other voluntary agencies working with children and young people, Fèisean nan Gàidheal adopted a Child Protection policy and implemented a training programme on this for member fèisean. The organisation was re-named Investors in People status, in recognition of the good working practices and staff development programmes.

With the help of Lottery funding, new projects included provision of a computer for each fèis; a tutor training programme for fèis tutors and organisers including Gaelic language courses, expansion of the musical instrument bank, and the development of Meanbh-chuileag. Around seventy-five fèis participants took part in the ‘Harvest’ concert at the Celtic Connections festival in Glasgow, co-ordinated by Feis Rois and directed by Caperaíllie’s Donald Shaw, to critical acclaim. Fèis participants then had the chance to work alongside their favourite professionals in a television series entitled ‘Beolach’, made by MnE with funding from Comataidh Cruailaidh Gàidhlig.

By this time, the number of fèisean had risen to 36, with 2,562 participating in main fèis events and 1,829 in continuation classes. Grants from Fèisean nan Gàidheal totalled £62,818 between 2003-2004. Following the need for more localised administrative support for fèisean, a new scheme of ‘annualised hours’ was introduced for the first time in 2003-04, with fèisean receiving funds for between 300 and 400 hours of administrative work each year. A total of £26,292 was committed by Fèisean nan Gàidheal for this scheme. A development fund was also introduced allowing Fèisean to apply for new projects.

The appointment of Iona MacDonald as Training Development Officer, in partnership with the Traditional Music Tutor Training Network also took place in 2003 and an even more comprehensive training programme for tutors and organisers was set in place. Resource materials were made available to member fèisean. In addition to two popular tuition books, Ceòl nam Fèis Volumes 1 and 2 compiled by Valerie Bryan, Alpha Munro prepared a bilingual fiddle tutor book. Meanwhile a Gaelic language course with an accompanying CD, Gàidhlig do luchd-tòiseachaidh was devised for fèis participants in a project between Feis Cille Mhoraig and Meanbh-chuileag. Funding from Bòrd na Gàidhlig allowed Mairi Kidd and Douglas Beck to develop Gaelic resource packs for each fèis, providing a range of materials including bilingual signs and ideas for Gaelic activities and games.

The musical instrument bank expanded with fifteen new clarsach, twelve accordions and twenty-four fiddles, bringing the total number of instruments available to over 200 although very few of them are in the same place at any one time! For most of the year instruments are loaned to individuals, and re-called for main fèisean during the holiday periods. The 2004 Fèisean nan Gàidheal annual report notes that many of our clarsach spend the whole summer on the road, touring from Lewis to Arran. Once the fèis season is over, most of the instruments will find their way back to individuals once again for a rest.

By the year 2004-05, 43 fèisean had received funding amounting to £162,651, and 13,063 young people had taken part in Fèisean nan Gàidheal activities. This included 3,420 in main fèis events, 1,467 in workshops, 4,666 in Youth Music initiative classes and 3,515 in Meanbh-chuileag drama workshops and performances.
the Blas Festival

Following a visit to Cape Breton by Highland Council representatives as part of their twinning arrangement, Feisean nan Gàidheal was asked by the Council to establish a new Highland-wide, community-based Celtic Music festival, similar to Cape Breton’s Celtic Colours Festival. The new festival, entitled Blas, meaning ‘taste’, was launched in November 2004 in Lochaber, Ross & Cromarty and Sutherland, involving some of the fèis participants who took part in Ceilidh Trails in these areas over the summer. In 2005, Blas was funded through the Millennium Commission’s Urban Cultural Programme and presented a full programme of events across Skye and Lochalsh, Ross and Cromarty, Caithness and Sutherland and Lochaber, again involving the fèisean and other local youth groups performing alongside established Highland and international artists, with Gaelic as a strong feature at all events.

Arthur Cormack explains:

Blas offers young musicians taking part in fèisean throughout the Highland Council’s area a unique opportunity to share the stage with the musicians they admire most. Feisean nan Gàidheal is always looking for innovative ways to engage the young people who take part in the fèisean in further exciting projects, and Blas should build on the community strength of the fèisean… and give people a ‘blas’ or ‘taste’ of things to come.

Blas operates as a partnership between local fèisean, Feisean nan Gàidheal, Highland Council and the Highland Promoter’s Arts Network. The festival’s website, www.blas-festival.com provides more details of the initiative.

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With financial assistance from Bòrd na Gàidhlig, a new initiative was launched in 2006 to help introduce more Gaelic language to the fèisean. Called the G-Team, it represents a part of Fèisean nan Gàidheal’s recognition of its potential role in encouraging greater use of the Gaelic language.

FÈISEAN NAN GÀIDHEAL: THE STAFF

ART MACCARMAIG:
Stiùiriche, Fèisean nan Gàidheal
Thoisch mise anns an Ògmhios 1992 agus bha sreath de dh fèisean a’ tachairt air làithean-saora an t-samhraidh. Bha mi a’ dol bhò eilean gu eilean eadar Tiriodh, Barraigh agus Uibhist a Deas agus air trì-mòr cuideachd. Goilspidh, Inbhir Nis, àiteachean mar sin a’ feuchainn ri faighinn timcheall air a h-uile fèis a bha a’ tachairt aig an àm. Bhithinn a’ bruidhinn ri daoine a bha an sàs annta agus dreach a’ faighneachd dhaibh de bhioint feumail.

’S e an ruda a bhu mhotha a bha iad ag iarraidh aig an àm sin, agus ‘s cinnteach gu bheil seo for fhathast, airgead a thogail airson na bha iad a’ deàinamh anns na coimhhearsnachd fhèin a chum a’ dol, gun a bhith a’ smaoineachadh air lesachadh sam bith. As deidh bladhna dh’iarr iad orm am plana lesachaidh a chur ri chèile airson fèisean nan Gàidheal ach bha e a’ gabhail a-steach nan amasan aig na fèisean fhèin cuideachd. ‘S e sin a rinn mi, le tòrr taic bho dhaoine eile o chionn ’s nach robh mi idir eólach air an t-seòrsa obach a bha siud aig an às. Dhi’ ionnsaich mi fein tòrr às.

Bha na fèisean ag iarraidh gum biodh buidheann ann a bhiodh a’ riochdachadh nam fèisean, chan ann a-mhàn a’ togail airgid – sin rud anns nach robh sin ann sàs anns a’ chiad dol a-mach a chionn ’s nach robh an comas againn sin a dheànanamh. Bha iad ag iarraidh gum biodh stuthan teagaisg ann agus ionnsramaidean – ãrachas cuideachd. Bha sin a’ cosg fortan dhaibh. Bha iad uile a’ paighdeachd dha no tìr cheud not gach bliadhna. Bha iad ag iarraidh coimhead air dòigh na b’fhèarr airson dèileadadh ri ãrachas airson nam fèisean air fad.

Tha mi a’ smaoineachadh gum do non sin, cha mhòr, a h-uile càil a bha iad ag iarraidh aig an àm sin agus tha na seirbhisean mar sin againn fhathast agus tha iad air an leudachadh. Thuig e dhomhna dhà no tìr bliadhna a’ bruaidhinn ris na buidhnean aig an às sin a bha a’ toirt seachadh an airgid mar Chomhairle nan Ealan, Comhairle Roinn na Gàidhealtachd agus Comhairle Srath Chluaidh mus robh iad a’ faireadhain comhailt gun robh buidheann ann a bhà comasach dèileagadh ris an airgeadais acasan. Aig an às, ghabh Fèisean nan Gàidheal sgeama thabhartasan os latchd bho Chomhairle nan Ealan. ’S e dòigh smaoineachadh gu math adhartach a bha sin. Cha robh Comhairle nan Ealan airson sin a dheànamh le buidheann sam bith eile. Bha iad a’ cumail an taic airgid aca fein agus bha iad a’ coimhead air a h-uile pròiseact a bha a’ tìghinn a-steach. Rinn e feum mòr dha na fèisean oir aig a cheann thall bha e comasach dhaibh ann a seòrsa sgeama a chur sin aird doigh a chruithneachadh. Bha na beachdan aca fhèin a’ tìghinn a-steach agus bha e a’ fhorword dhuinne sgeama a chur ri chèile a bha freagarrach dhaibh a’ deànamh cinnteach gun robh e reusanta dhan a h-uile fèis.
– gun robh iad a’ fhaighinn airgid gu leòr airson na bha iad a’ déanamh a chumail a’ dol. ‘S e an duilgheadas bu mhotha a bh’ ann. Cha robh iad mhor a bh’ ann. Tha mi a’ smaointeachadh. ‘S e aithisg a rinn e air Feis Bharragh agus chuir e iongadh orrasan gun taing an òigrigh, ceud gu leth dhùibh, air ais dhan sgol air làithean-saora aca airson coileachd. Ach tha mi a’ smaointeachadh gu bheil barrachd aithne air ceòil traidiscanta na h-Alba na bh’ ann o chionn coig bliadhna fichead. Tha taic phoilicataigeach ann nach robh ann agus is cinnteach gu ann air sgàth nam féisean agus rudan mar sin a thainig sin cuideachd.

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Tha e neònach smaoineachadh gu bheil a’ chuìfle air tionndadh agus gu bheil foghlam a-nise a’ coimhead air ceòl traidiseanta mar rud cudromach.

Fèis Alba a thug sinn air an fhéis sin. ’S ann do na daoine as sinn air an fèisean agus na daoine a bhà ag iarraidh beòbhlàint a dhéanach ann an ceòl traidiseanta no ann an Gàidhlig a chaidh Feis Alba a stèidheadh. Bha sinn airson leasachadh pearsanta a thoirt stèidheadh. Bha sinn airson Gàidhlig a chaidh Fèis Alba a na daoine a bha ag iarraidh as sine ann na fèisean agus feis sin. ’S ann do na daoine a bhà a thug sinn airson feis sin na daoine a bhà ag iarraidh beòbhlàint a dhéanach ann an ceòl traidiseanta.

Bha e airgead againn bhon Crannchar agus dìthid air a Gàidhlealtachd. Fhì thuirt e go mìdh an fear a bha iad a leasachadh a dhàin a’ Ghàidhlig agus a bhà a thug sinn eadar don fèis san àird a dhèanach. An fìcheadh mìdhChoimhearsnachd a bhà a bhith a’ toirt a thoirt a thachadh a’ turas air sinn. ’S ann do na daoine a bhà a thug sinn eadar don fèis san àird a dhèanach.

Fhì thuirt e go mìnigh airson thosachdon air an t-àirde. Bha e airgead againn bhon Crannchar agus dìthid air a Gàidhlealtachd. Fhì thuirt e go mìdh an fear a bha iad a leasachadh a dhàin a’ Ghàidhlig agus a bhà a thug sinn eadar don fèis san àird a dhèanach. An fìcheadh mìdhChoimhearsnachd a bhà a bhith a’ toirt a thoirt a thachadh a’ turas air sinn.

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I recall reading something Frank Rennie wrote in which he expressed surprise that children were so willing to be back in school during their holidays. But at a feast you may be involved in something which is also good fun. Though they attend to learn skills in musical instruments and in Gaelic they do have a great time while they are there.

Our remit and workforce has expanded over the years. There are two Development Officers now in the Highlands, one in Argyllshire and another in the Western Isles. A Training Officer has also been appointed.

We are deeply indebted to the efforts of the volunteers for all the work they do to develop fèisean. Perhaps individual fèisean are in a form of competition with each other in that if one fèis brings in a successful innovation it tends to be adopted by others.

Over the years I have heard criticism of how strong the fèisean are on Gaelic. I’m certain that every fèis tries its best and they are supported by us to promote Gaelic. The critics didn’t understand the developments and advancements that the fèisean were generating for Gaelic. We noticed early on that no-one at the fèisean was against taking Gaelic forward, but that they didn’t have the means to do so. Nor did we as a group, with three of us working for the fèisean, but a lot has changed since then. The fèisean aren’t there to keep Gaelic alive, but what is important is that they get a taste of Gaelic, they will be immersed in the Gaelic culture and at the end of the day, they may get a taste of Gaelic, they will be immersed in the Gaelic culture and I think that they will be more positive about Gaelic and perhaps they’d be more positive about taking the language forward.

I believe that interest in traditional music in Scotland has grown over the past 25 years. I am sure that the success of so many fèisean throughout the land has helped to raise awareness of an interest in traditional music. Courses have been established in places like Stow College, Strathclyde University and the RSAMD and there are now very many more opportunities to make your living as a traditional musician.

I hope that fèisean will grow and other communities get involved in the movement. In such circumstances perhaps we can become more insistant that fèisean should be schools for Gaelic as well as music schools. But my main hope is that they continue and will...
be still to the fore 25 years from now. I am certain that they will be.

What’s strange in a way, if you look at the development of the youth music initiative and the other opportunities available in formal education, perhaps there will be no need for the féisean. Effectively féisean started because formal education did not support traditional music or Gaelic in Barra. It’s funny to think that the tables are turning and that formal education now sees traditional music and language as something important.

DAVID BOAG:
David is the Development Manager for Fèisean nan Gàidheal, based in Inverness. In the course of two interviews, David first explains his early influences and secondly, in Gaelic, he tells us about his career working with the féisean and Fèisean nan Gàidheal.

I’m a relative latecomer to the féisean, having attended my first one when I was about 18 years old, Fèis an Earraich in Portree, in the early nineties. My own musical upbringing to that point wasn’t a féis one and although I obviously think that féisean are fantastic, I count myself very lucky to have had the opportunities that I had. My mother is a native Gaelic speaker from the Lochalsh area and my dad is extremely supportive of all things Gaelic, so from an early age I was surrounded by Gaelic music. Language wise, although I wasn’t a Gaelic speaker as a child, I did Gaelic at secondary school and a year of it at University. I am now more or less fluent and like most people, am learning something new every day. Working with Féisean nan Gàidheal, in a Gaelic speaking environment, I am fortunate to be able to develop these skills.

When we moved to Portree from Dingwall in 1982 I was encouraged to sing, taking part in the school choir and solo singing at Mods. It was around this time that I first met Arthur Cormack who was in sixth year at the time and was conducting the primary school choir.

As well as singing I had a few fiddle lessons in Dingwall Primary School before we left for Skye, but there was no strings instructor there at that time. So it wasn’t until I was about 13 that my interest in the fiddle was re-kindled, after meeting local fiddle player John Gilbert and his wife Chrissie. Anyone who knows John and Chrissie will know the tremendous welcome and friendship which exists in their home, and it was through regular sessions there that I learnt. These sessions were, and continue to be a magnet for other musicians and I met some excellent people there.

I didn’t resume my formal fiddle tuition until I was in fifth or sixth year at school, when Christine Martin moved to the area. At that time there was a few of us who came together at lunch times for sessions, and this developed into a group which played here and there throughout Skye. I was also one of the original members of the Skye and Lochalsh Fiddlers, which started around about that time.

As well as all of this, I attended the first ever Sabhal Mòr Ostaig summer school with Alasdair Fraser, and the next year, we were treated to the expertise of Buddy MacMaster.

DAIBHIDH BOAG:
Manaidsear Leasachaidh Fèisean nan Gàidheal

Nuair a dh’fhàg mi an oilthigh ann an 1995 fuair mi obair aig Feòr Rois ann an Inbhir-Pheolcharain. An-sin bha mi aig obair air a h-uile rud – air Feòr an t-Samhradh aca agus aig obair anns an oifis a dèanamh rud sàbh. An uair sin nochd obair aig Féisean nan Gàidheal ann an 1997, airson Feòr Alba a stèidheachadh. B’ ann aig an am sin a thoisisich mi leis a bhuidhinn.

Cha robh ach Art ag obair airson Féisean nan Gàidheal aig an am sin. Thòisich mi fìn agus Anne Willoughby air an aon latha. Bha an tràir againn ag obair anns a’ bhasament ann am bùth Airt, ’s cha robh unneag neo cail ann. Thòisich mi anns an Dùblachd agus bha mi a’ dol...
Mar a thuir mi, b’ i Fèisean Alba a’ chaid obair a bh’ agam aig Fèisean nan Gàidheal. Bha beachd ac a féis nàiseanta a chur air bonn airson deugairean agus an earradh le bu shine na sin.

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I put down clàrsach as my first instrument. I was trying to provoke a reaction, which is what I got, because the woman turned round and said ‘Oh, clàrsach. And what do you expect to do with that?’

as much as possible; this encourages them to co-operate and support each other and also creates new ideas.

I wasn’t really interested in Gaelic to begin with; I suppose I wasn’t consciously going to the fèis to learn Gaelic – it was there, and as the fèis developed, the level of Gaelic developed, and my own Gaelic too. I would consider myself an advanced learner now. I’m by no means fluent, but I did Standard Grade and Higher Gaelic at school, and this post will give me a real push to improve my skills. There were a combination of influences, my sister was one and the basics I got from playing morning games at the fèis. I took clàrsach at school, rather than do French or German and once I started it, I really enjoyed it and still do.

When I left school, the Community Arts course at Strathclyde University offered the chance to do practical work, music, art, dance, drama, and also the academic side. It’s a combination of both, so I went to do the course straight from school. I didn’t want to be a musician. I started teaching when I was about 17. At that stage I was doing workshops and teaching quite a lot and I suppose it was a way of keeping all that going and doing a degree at the same time. I’ve taught at Fèis Bharraigh, Thiriodh, Latharna, Glascu, ‘sa Mheadhan, Arrain and Fèis na h-Oglie.

I went to Cape Breton first on a six-week work placement, living with a family all of whom played and step danced. My first placement through my degree course was with Fèisean nan Gàidheal and my second in Cape Breton, based with Mary Janet MacDonald, the director of a new school-based community theatre in Mabou, one of the main venues for the Celtic Colours festival. The Mabou area has a wealth of local musicians. The Rankin Family are among the most well-known, but there are so many very, very talented musicians there. While I was there, I was involved in Gaelic and ‘cultural exchange’ classes. The teacher had Eriskay connections and they had set up a link with Eriskay School. They have a fèis in Mabou – I taught a workshop along with the girls in the family I stayed with. It’s less concentrated, they would have one workshop a day and it’s open to everybody, not just young people. There is another fèis in Cape Breton too, Fèis an Eilein. Mary Janet MacDonald, who I stayed with, visited the fèis in Barra in the early days – she has memories of playing tunes with Blair Douglas! So there are some strong connections.

In my third year, I approached Celtic Connections and set up a placement with them. This is an annual arrangement now, but I was the first student to do this – my claim to fame!

That was a fantastic experience. I mainly worked on the education programme, setting up workshops, assisting with tutoring, arranging workshops in schools, bringing children into the Royal Concert Hall.

I think the fèis probably did influence my choice of career; had I not gone to the fèis I wouldn’t have been as keen on music, I might not have stuck with the accordion. And certainly dance-wise – through dance I’ve got more into the music, and Gaelic as well, it’s all so interconnected.

After I did my Community Arts degree I did a Masters in Festival Production, which was influenced by the fèisean and by working with Celtic Connections, so there’s a definite link there.

CARIISTONA NIC AN T-SAOR:

Neach-abrach nam Fèisean Ionadail – Earra-Ghàidheal agus Eilean Bhòid

Tha mi ag obair aig Fèisean nan Gàidheal agus tha mi a’ toirt seachad taic dha na fèisean a tha eadar Earra-Ghàidheal sìos gu Srauth Chluaidh. Tha còrr is 11 fèisean agam.

Gu math tric nuair a bhios mi a’ cur air ais na ‘mileage forms’ tha mi air seachad air 1,000 mile a dheanamh anns a’ mhòr.

Bhitheadh an Gàidheal gu saor-tholleach aig Fèis Tìr a’ Mhurain agus nuair a dh’ghlìais mo theaghleach gu Earra-Ghàidheal, chumna mi sanas anns a’ phàipear airson an obair a tha seo. Chuir mi a-staigh air a son agus fhuaire mi i.

Bhit mi a’ cuideachadh nam fèisean le a bhith a’ long ‘tutors’ dhabh agus bidh mi cuideachd a gùilain ionnstraimaidean air feadh Alba. Cuideachd, bidh mi a’ cur air dòigh ‘disclosure forms’ airson gu bheil feum aig a h-ùile duine a bhith air a sgrudadh.

Rinn mi an gnothach air Fèis Lannraig a Tuath a thoirt air adhart bho féis aon latha gu feòs ceithir latha. Feumaidh mi cuideachd a bhith ann an-sin aird an bhith ag ràdh riutha gu bheil iad a’ deannamglè rhàth.

Tha sin gu math cudromach.

Bhid e uaireannann a’ cur uallach orm gu bheil feadhainn dhe na fèisean a’ fàcinn Fèisean nan Gàidheal mar sporan is nach eil foir acachd gu faid Fèisean nan Gàidheal cuideachadh a thorid dhàbh bhionn ‘tutors’ a thèradh agus airson a bhith a’ deannamh cursaichean tréanaidh do dhaoinne a tha a’ chòmataidh aca.

Bhid na fèisean ann an Earra-Ghàidheal agus ann an Glascu gu h-àirde a’ fàcinn Fèisean nan Gàidheal ann an Inbhir Nis agus anns an Eilean Sgitheanach cho fada air falbh agus e mise an aon ‘chontact’ a tha aca. Tha mi a’ smaointeachadh gu bheil bisteadadh ann eadar dé na tha fèisean fhéin a’ smaointeachadh.

Uaireannann, canad air Fèisean nan Gàidheal gum bu choir barrachd Aoidhghidh a bhith aig Fèisean, ach mar eismeilear, ‘s e sgrìre gu math bochd a tha ann a Dhùn Bhreatainn ann an tòrr rudan, chan ann a-mhàin ann an Aoidhghidh. Tha e doirb na daoine óg a tha sin a thorid a-mach na ‘schemes’ is an toirt a-staigh gu phìosaileach. Tha Fèis Dhùn Bhreatainn a’ cur cuideigin
a-staighdha na sgoiltean airson bràin Ghàidhlig a thoir thidh aig a chuir thu an dòigh a tha e a' deanamh air a' chloinn. Bha Còinneach Thomson a teagasc ann agus bha còrr is fichead aig e agus air an latha mu dheireadh dhìn teann thuair e fichead cairt a 'toirt taing dha. Bha an t-a'ainn aig e a' litiricheadh ann am fichead dòigh dhòigh ach cha robh sin gu dòigh!

Nuair a thòiseachaidh tu air feis an teosachd, feumaidh tu an aire a thoir nach eil thu a' fìachair air òran a' chur às an sàs air na buidhnean mun cuairt. Chì an ceòl a thoirt gu tòrr àiteachan thàinig don chànan tron cheòl. Mòr agus àiteachean mar sin na cànan a chur sìos amhaich dhuine. Toiseach, feumaidh tu an aire a thug i fèist an aige air a litricheadh ann am toirt taing dha. Nuair a thòisich thu air fèis an toiseachd, bha an t-ainn aig e a' litiricheadh ann am fichead dòigh dhòigh ach cha robh sin gu dòigh!

INGRID HENDERSON:
Feasain Development Officer, Lochaber

My involvement in the feisean started around twelve years ago, as a tutor. When the feis started in Acharacle and Fort William I was about fourteen or fifteen, so I didn't actually come through the feis movement as a youngster.

My first involvement was tutoring at Feise nan Garbh Chriochn. For about five years I taught clarsach at follow-on classes, as well as teaching at the summer feis. I then taught at Feis Lochaber, Feis Rois and various feisean throughout the Highlands. I started working for Feisean nan Gàidheal in 2001 when I applied for the part-time support worker for the West Highlands and Aberdeen – the geography of that doesn't make any sense at all! I worked at that for two or three years and then the development post at Feisean nan Gàidheal in Lochaber came on stream.

I started playing the piano at the age of six. My granny taught all my brothers and sisters to play. I took on the harp at the age of seven with private lessons in Mallaig. That developed into weekend workshops, not feis related, but with a similar format that maybe different tutors or organisations had arranged. By the time I had started tutoring at the age of seventeen, my musical experience was mainly what I had learnt from my tutors, Savourna Stevenson and Aonghas Grant, folk like that. Also, I had been away performing from the age of fourteen, going round Europe, America and Canada and performing at festivals. So I had a lot of experience from that point of view, but I've never had formal training as a tutor.

So I put down clarsach as my first instrument. I was trying to provoke a reaction, which is what I got, because the woman turned round and said 'Oh, clarsach. And what do you expect to do with that?'

That's over ten years ago now but I think you might still get that attitude in some places. But the fact that the RSAMD Traditional Music course came on stream a few years later shows that slowly the wheels are turning.

So, that's my background. I have taught from a young age and find it natural to do and really enjoy it. I think it comes back to having had good teachers who have shared their time and experience with you. I always cite Aonghas Grant as a good example, because he has done so much teaching and has passed on so much, and really he doesn't have to. He could just go and play his fiddle and not bother about that aspect of it, but I just have a respect for that and I think that if someone has spent time with you, you should go and do the same. When I started with the feisean, although I was younger and happy to be working in music, I still realized that I had a responsibility to the tradition, to what you have been taught and to have a respect for it as well. You're put in a privileged position, and you have to pass things on. It actually sharpens your game, because you start to look into things in a little more detail, whether it's technique or whether it's the background to a tune that you think is important to pass on to a youngster.

I don't think I was that aware of the feisean when they started, just because of my age at the time and I was doing my own thing. But as I got to know more about it, I thought it was a great thing for the area. All of a sudden there was far better access to traditional music tuition, it meant that any child between the ages of five and 18 could have access to music if they wanted to. I think on the whole, for youngsters in the area, which has been quite strong in music, if you didn't have parents who were aware of the tradition and actually wanted to educate their children in this, you could easily slip over it and not have anything to do with it. So the feisean certainly brought the awareness level up massively.

I think a community gets to a stage where a week in a year isn't enough, so I think the follow-up classes are brilliant. To have them all in one place on one night is great too because you have a sense of atmosphere, the kids aren't learning in isolation. They're not thinking that it's something different; it's natural because so-and-so from down the road is coming along too. So I think that sense of gathering people together...
is a good one. If communities can do that in their on-going programme then I think that’s the way to go.

The fèisean that I know best have happened naturally in communities where there is a need and a want to protect Gaelic culture. In Acharacle for example, local people were afraid of a decline in young people learning Gaelic and its associated culture and their reaction to it was to set up the successful Feis nan Garbh-Chloichgan. I think that if it was imposed on them, it wouldn’t have worked as well.

So I think that the natural and organic way that the fèisean have developed is a really good thing. Community-wise, the fèisean have made a huge difference, because in most communities where there is a fèis, it is the main cultural resource and is the main source of tuition for music and Gaelic song.

As part of my development work I talk to councillors and business people about the good work of the fèisean and they are continuously amused at the success of it in communities. Nationally, fèisean nan Gàidheal being there as the umbrella body and fighting the cause all the time has made a huge difference because it’s like one powerful, collective body. All of a sudden organisations like the Scottish Executive, Highland Council and the Scottish Arts Council are realising that, after twenty odd years, it’s actually a good thing. Community-wise, the fèisean have made a huge difference, because in most

FIONA NIC AONGHAIS:

Ofigear-tasga ann na h-Eileanan an lár

Bidh mise a’ coinneadh as dèidh nam fèisean anns na h-Eileanan an lár, a’ toirt taic dhaibh agus a’ coinneadh as dèidh na dh’fheumas iad. Cuideachd thà mi a’ déanamh obair an lùb na h-ógairdhrug agus a’ feuchainn ri barrachd chothrom an t-òrdh dhaibh airson am faighinn cómhla airson seinn agus airson a dh’fheumas iad.

Tha mi a’ smaoineachadh gu bheil na fèisean anns na h-Eileanan an lár a’ déanamh cho math agus a’ déanamh adhartais a’ h-uile bliadhna oir aig deireadh an latha, tha daoine a tha gu math deònach a bhith ag obair gu saor-thòileach air na comataidh aca. Ma tha comataidh laird an lár, sin a’ déanamh diofar airson na clòinne.

Tha barrachd ùidh ann a-nise. Is toil leis a’ chloinn a bhith a cluiche ciul far a bhith iad a’ fàsach cothrom tighinn cómhla. Tha faoi feisean a-nise mar phàirt dhen bheatha a dh’fhios aca agus tha fios aca a h-uile samhradh gu bheil feas ann.

Tha mi a’ smaoineachadh gu bheil ùidh anns na h-Eileanan air fad agus tha mi a’ airson gun tèid luchd-turasair a-steach dha na taighthean-òsda is gun cluinn iad an òigrìdh a’ cluiche ceòl tradiseanta às na h-Eileanan air fad. Thà mi ‘n dòchas gu bheil iad airson gun tèid luchd-thurasair a-steach dha na taighthean-òsda is gun cluinn iad an òigrìdh a’ cluiche ceòl tradiseanta às na h-Eileanan air fad.

A thaobh nam fèisean anns na h-Eileanan an lár, tha mi ‘n dochas gu bheil an diofar a bhith a dhèanamh dhen chlann beò. Tha sin a’ còrdadh ri muinntir na h-Eileanan air fhathast ach tha mi ‘n dòchas gu bheil iad airson gun tèid luchd-thurasair a-steach dha na taighthean-òsda is gun cluinn iad an òigrìdh a’ cluiche ceòl tradiseanta às na h-Eileanan air fad. Tha sin a’ chloinn a bhith a cluiche ciul far a bhith iad a’ fàsach cothrom tighinn cómhla. Tha faoi feisean a-nise mar phàirt dhen bheatha a dh’fhios aca agus tha fios aca a h-uile samhradh gu bheil feas ann.

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ANNE WILLOUGHBY: Oifigear Ionmhais agus Rianachd Fèisean nan Gàidheal.

Thòisich mi aig Fèisean nan Gàidheal anns an Fhaoilleach 1998. ’S e rianachd as motha a tha mi a’ dèanamh agus obair ionmhais. Cuideachd, a’ coimhead as déidh sgeama thabhartasan airson nam fèisean. Thàinig mi aig Fèisean nan Gàidheal anns an Fhaoilleach 1998. Tha na fèisean air dublachadh bhon a thòisich mise ag obair aig Fèisean nan Gàidheal. Tha mi a’ smaoineachadh gu bheil Fèisean nan Gàidheal a’ cosg an airgid mar bu chòir. Tha an t-airgead mar bu choir dhùnnaigh agus tha sinn a’ cur a’ h-uile rud air dhùnnaigh a-steach dha na fèisean fhèin.

Tha na fèisean air ùr a’ coimhead airson barrachd cuideachaidh bho Fèisean nan Gàidheal, chan e idir airgead, ach dreach comhairle, stiùireadh is rudan mar sin a bhios a dth’obh orra.

Tha na fèisean air ùr a’ coimhead airson barrachd cuideachaidh bho Fèisean nan Gàidheal, chan e idir airgead, ach dreach comhairle, stiùireadh is rudan mar sin a bhios a dth’obh orra.
I never tire of seeing the kids’ faces light up as they tackle the last few notes of the ‘Fairy Lullaby’, and realise that they’ve learned their first tune! The fèis has to be one of the most rewarding weeks of the year.

Lauren MacColl, Fiddle Tutor

‘Their music knows no detour – it goes straight to the feet if dance we must, to our eyes if cry we must and always directly to our hearts evoking every shade of joy, sorrow or contentment...The genuine Scottish fiddler has an infallible sense of rhythm, never plays out of tune and is master of his distinctive and inimitable style, which is more than can be said of most ‘schooled’ musicians. We classical violinists have too obviously paid a heavy price for being able to play with orchestras and follow a conductor.’

AONGHAS GRANT:
Fiddler and Tutor

Aonghas Grant is one of the finest fiddlers Scotland has known. He has performed nationally and internationally for over sixty years, and still finds time to teach at feisean.

I think the feis movement is one of the finest things that has ever happened to the Highlands. It has totally rejuvenated the music, song and dance. When I was a boy in the thirties, there was nothing like that at all. People of my generation never had the wonderful opportunities that youngsters have nowadays.

When I was young it was just various families that kept the music and song and Gaelic alive. My father’s family were very much like that – pipers and fiddlers and Gaelic singers. My father also wrote Gaelic songs and poetry. There was another family, the MacDonalds of Fort Augustus who were all fiddlers and Gaelic singers. My own son, for example, hasn’t done anything except play the fiddle since he left the High School. He’s gone all over the world with his band, Shooglenifty. I would have liked to have done that too, I would like to have spent my life as a full-time musician. If I had said that to my father he would have laughed. At that time, you couldn’t actually think of making a living particularly if you were married with children.

Our son was very clever at school; he was captain of the debating society in both the Primary and the High Schools. We were at a parents’ meeting once and the headmaster said he would make a great lawyer, and he would advise that Law would be a good thing to study. So when he left the High School I said ‘what are you going to do with yourself? Are you going on to university to study Law or something?’ ‘Perhaps’ he said, ‘I think I’ll take a while out’. A while after that he borrowed fifty pounds off me, went away to a festival in Holland in the summertime and never appeared back until about 10.30pm on Christmas Eve.

By that time, himself and an Irish boy had busked their way through Europe, and that was it, there was no more word of going to university. There’s been nothing but playing the fiddle since. I think my wife takes a better view and would have liked to see him in a more stable job like a lawyer or a teacher, but he’s happy with his music and I suppose that’s what he wanted to do.

It’s tremendous that our native music which is part of our heritage and culture is becoming so vibrant and alive now, having been dormant for many years.

One of the things that’s a bit tricky now is that the kids are hearing so much music from all over the world, that the native regional styles are starting to fade out. All the regions have their own styles of playing. Even the Fort Augustus and the Glengarry fiddlers have a slightly different style. When I came down the west in 1956 as a shepherd and deer stalker, I met up with Farquhar MacRae. They had quite a different style, even has totally rejuvenated the music, song and Gaelic alive.

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In some ways I always thought that traditional music is a history in sound. It has sad songs of parting and emigration, lively jigs and reels of happier times at weddings and love songs. You’ve got it all in music and song and it’s part of the tradition.

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real traditional style of playing. Whereas back here, it’s starting to come a little bit, but they’re still not keen on tutors going into the schools unless you have a teaching certificate.

Tom Anderson was the first person that started going into the schools in Shetland, when he retired as an insurance man.
There were two or three strings teachers teaching classical stuff and within a couple of months of Anderson taking over, there was no one left because they were all wanting to learn their native music. Tom had droves and droves of people learning the Shetland fiddle. There’s good young Shetland people teaching in the schools now, which is great.

With the feis, it’s amazing what happens after a whole week of pretty intensive music and song and dance. You start off with them on a Monday and sometimes you say to yourself ‘are you ever going to get these kids to stand up and play at a concert on Friday?’. It all seems to be a shambles, and round about Wednesday it all starts to come together and on Friday they come up and all do great. The kids will see other kids performing well and it gives them a bit of a goal which makes them want to stick in. You usually have a feis group with the best performers and they play at the final concert. And when the younger kids see the stars coming on the stage and they're doing so well, it gives them a great initiative to progress themselves.

It's important to get out and perform in public. It gives the kids a lot of confidence. There’s some who are very shy and don’t like doing that and then it gives them a little bit of confidence not only in music but in life to present themselves a bit and that’s a good thing. I think the feisean have been tremendous. They’ve done more good than the National Mod has done in a hundred years because it’s non-competitive. It’s just a case of all the kids learning something for a week in a very happy atmosphere and no stress to be at a certain standard and they all get their turn to do something.

I’m just back from Feis Spe and one of the highlights we had there on the Friday afternoon was the tutors against the kids at the shinty. In my mid-seventies I was playing shinty for the first time in forty years. I should have got ‘man of the match’! The kids beat us 3-2, because most of the tutors had never held a shinty stick in their life before and couldn’t hit the ball far enough away from the goal.

There’s great camaraderie between the kids and the tutors. All the kids are all on first name terms with the tutors, its not Mr this and Mrs that, so I think they see us as older versions of themselves, and a lot of us are really still boys at heart.

I think that’s very important that you teach the kids music that is associated with their area. On Raasay, some of the tunes I teach are Cailleach Liath Ratharsaid, Mrs MacLeod of Raasay, Oan Mor MhicLeòid and Calum’s Road. And when I was in Speyside, there I was teaching The Killie Castle, The Haughs of Cromdale and the Spey in Spate. I’m not against people learning other music, but you should learn your own music first.

I get a great thrill in the young ones starting, who don’t know how to hold a fiddle and a bow, and I get them going. I just get them playing a wee Gaelic air in no time, because all the kids want to do is play a tune. The way I work is both by eye and ear. When I’m teaching by ear, I get them to watch what I’m doing with my fingers too. Mind, of course, that I’m left-handed and the strings are the opposite way round. I’ve never found any difficulty in it, it’s just like a mirror image and all my pupils pick up on it no bother. Once they get the hang of where to put their fingers, I usually put a wee drop of Tippex on the first, second and third finger, we don’t bother with the fourth finger for a while.

That gets them going with some wee Gaelic tune like Hò bhàn, Hò bhàn, Sine Bhàn or any of these nice wee tunes. Within ten minutes of tutoring you can spot ones that have the cool. One of the tunes I cannot stand is Twinkle, Twinkle. I don’t know what the Gaelic is for Twinkle, Twinkle but it’s definitely not a traditional tune. There’s no need for the Twinkle Twinkle when you can go straight onto a Gaelic tune.

We’ve always have good crack at the feisean and we tend to usually have great sessions amongst ourselves. It’s always a good laugh. I think this is one of the good things about the feisean that make it so successful, that it is that slightly laid-back style that we have in the Highlands.

I think this is one of the good things about the feisean that make it so successful, that it is that slightly laid-back style that we have in the Highlands.
When I first heard of the fèis in Barra, I thought it was a wonderful idea. I think before it started I got a phone call from Father Calum, who was a priest in Glenfinnan saying ‘any chance of going out to Ireland on a tour with this Barra crowd?’ Anyway, we went up to Galway with Cathy Anne MacPhee, Ruaraidh Campbell and a couple of lassies that were dancing. We had a wonderful week there and that was my first meeting with Father Colin. I didn’t realise that it would all mushroom so quickly. It’s done so much good, the kids now have such an interest in their own native music, song and dance which before was lying dormant and just had to be awakened by the fèisean and long may it continue. It’s good that all the young ones are coming up and going into the tutoring, so that when old timers like myself, when we’re on the wrong side of the grass they’ll still be going on. I’d like to think that I was a wee help in keeping it going. I think it’s in a very healthy state.

Before, if any of the kids felt like playing the fiddle or the box, usually their parents would go and see the best-known local fiddler or box player, and there again a lot of them had no real interest in teaching and didn’t know about teaching. Even myself, I just started teaching my son and my daughter, latterly she learned the pipes. I just started there. And then Tom Anderson got me started teaching at the summer school at Stirling University. I told him that I hadn’t taught anyone except my own. He assured me it would be fine and I was amazed at the success because I would just demonstrate how I would play a tune and what I would do with a bow. Anderson said to me that I should start teaching at home and keep the style going. Then Allan Henderson’s father phoned me up and Allan started up and it just took off from there.

Last year I was invited back to the big fiddle festival and the last hour of the concert was a tribute to myself with sixty years of playing. I had my son and daughter playing with me, Ewan Beaton from Invergarry, Nicola Patience from Claggan, Garry Robertson from Lochaber and others, all that crowd that had started up with me played together and it was good.

So that’s how I wandered into it. I like to think that I’ve had a bit of influence on a lot of the fiddlers who’ve all been around me, picking up a bit of my style. They’ve all got my style of bowing. With each generation music moves a wee bit, it doesn’t stand still. If Niel Gow appeared back today after two hundred years he probably wouldn’t quite recognise the way fiddlers play today compared to what he played. The main thing is keep to the basic roots of the music. Ornamentation is a very personal thing and you can overdo that. I think mostly the style in the Highlands is in the phrasing and the tempo and the way individual fiddler’s idea of bowing, which is all very difficult to capture on paper. There’s this bit of freedom of interpreting the music.

The local fèisean are predominately run by volunteers and they give up a tremendous amount of personal time for free and that’s one of the great strengths of it. I think we’re lucky to have such a great guy as Arthur Cormack at the helm, a very astute guy at organising things. You need good organisers, like Rita Hunter and Ingrid Henderson and people that are good at organising.
The money people make at the fèis is never going to make people rich; goodwill is a currency in the fèis movement, and if you look after people well, then you get that goodwill.

DOUGIE PINCOCK: Director, National Centre of Excellence for Traditional Music; Piper and Tutor

It's strange, but it took an American to get me involved in the fèisean. Susie Petrov taught at Fèis Chataibh in Golspie and suggested to the organisers that I might be alright as a tutor. I was leaving the Battlefield Band and looking for work at that time. And as with a lot of other people at that time, when you got involved with one fèis, the word goes out, as much amongst tutors as organisers; they would say 'oh, I was at Fèis Chataibh with so-and-so, and he was alright'; so you're invited to others. The next year, I think it was 1991; I was at Fèis Rois, Jim Gaitens and Rita Hunter roped me into that, and it just snowballed from there.

It's a classic example of how the business works; you're kind of in the right place at the right time. I'd known Susie for years through the Battlefield Band, and Charlie Menzies, who was involved in Fèis Chataibh, knew her too. I just really enjoyed it – but in other ways it was just meeting all these other people, names I'd heard, people I should have known but had never met, Iain MacFarlane for example.

Through the fèis movement I had the chance to meet all these people and work with them, and learn from them too – learn how to teach, and how you work with youngsters. Then it all developed to the point where by the mid 1990s I was making a fairly substantial chunk of my living as a musician with the fèis movement. I was doing maybe eight to ten different fèisean a year, and started to become a bit of a 'senior tutor'. There was a bit of a 'coterie' around the fèisean at that time. I was doing some stage management of concerts and so on and getting feedback from organisers.

When we did the first couple of big Ceòl nam Fèis concerts in Eden Court Theatre in Inverness, I was involved as the musical director; and then was asked to speak about the fèisean at conferences and so on. I agree with the idea of big concerts like Ceòl nam Fèis. I know how hard they are to organise and I don't think they can be an annual event. They were very hard work for everyone concerned, and Fèisean nan Gàidheal was sensible enough to make sure they took over that kind of work.

My involvement in the fèisean developed quite remarkably actually and I was too busy to do other stuff because the fèisean were a main part of my work. Then other jobs came along, like being an instructor at the Piping Centre and teaching at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, and it just cut down the time I could be available for fèisean. When I got this job at Plockton, that was it knocked on the head.

My job now is Director of the National Centre of Excellence for Traditional Music, which is a residential project, based at Plockton High School, for talented youngsters from all over the country. I've got a great team of tutors, many of whom I met through the fèis movement. The website www.musicplockton.org has all the information about the school. It's actually an important point to note that the reason that the National School of Excellence came into existence was to build on all the work in traditional music that's been going on in Scotland in the past 10 – 20 years, a substantial part of which has been through the fèis movement. A high percentage of our students have come through the fèisean, and the tutors have all worked in the fèisean at some point or other.

Most fèisean have group work, but they have it as an adjunct to the access stage. So challenges include – hang on to the teenagers. Not everyone can put on a bit of group work, but when they do, the kids come back raving about it. I've spoken to people that have seen the Cèilidh Trails around the Highlands and they're astonished at the level of talent and professionalism that these youngsters have.

I learned a lot about Gaelic through the fèis; about different cultural attitudes that someone from Glasgow didn't know much about. I learned huge amounts about how to teach, working with other teachers, about education for adults as well as for young people. And organisers too. A...
lot of the organisers I used to talk to really loved bumping up against that kind of professional coterie I mentioned earlier, and would spend ages talking about the music business. Great tune sessions and talking about things. Great learning sessions really.

The fèis movement is generally pretty good at looking after people who work for it, in particular local fèisean with the limited money they have. It’s a positive working environment, which is something worth stressing; it’s a nice place to be as a working tutor. The money people make at the fèis is never going to make people rich; goodwill is a currency in the fèis movement, and if you look after people well, then you get that goodwill. Some of the things I’ve seen people do in the name of goodwill, and have done myself, to make sure a concert or a week at the fèis runs ok – the hours that are put in will far exceed the financial reward, but it’s cool because you’re well looked after and it’s appreciated. You’ll put that back in, if you’re a musician or a session musician or semi-professional or whatever. It’s a great way of regenerating the business. I tell the students, ‘go and work for a fèis, it’s a smashing way of putting something back in, of keeping the whole thing going.’

There are a lot of people now, young tutors who are fèis people themselves, going back into the system. It’s very important to see it regenerating itself to some extent. That’s a future development I’d like to see more of, where people graduate out to the fèis scene and come back into it and contribute to it again.

Where will we be in 25 years? Still here! Over 25 years the movement has done really well. There will always be people who have some resistance to development, saying it should just stay the way that it is; they can’t really grow much more and that’s ok. I hate the way in society we often look for things to grow bigger and bigger until they burst. Some things have a natural size and they should stay that way. A major thing for Highland life is depopulation, young people moving away – that’s a challenge for there’s only going to be a certain number of people around to work with, and keeping those people involved is going to be a challenge.

Volunteer burnout is a thing people talk about all the time; it’s very valid. That volunteer organiser thing has to be regenerated as well as the musical side of things and cultural side, and that can only really be done if more people get involved. Twenty-five years is a long time; there’s been an explosive growth over that period of time, and it can’t really be sustained. The thing will grow at its own pace and there’s all sorts of things happening that are developments out of the fèisean as a whole – traditional musicians in schools, Cèilidh Trails, the big concerts, these are things that will grow, and more ideas will come. At the core of it all there still has to be a community that gets together, brings tutors, teaches kids the traditional tunes of the area — and has a right good time. That’s got to stay at the heart of it. I’d like to see it getting a bit more money from the Scottish Arts Council and whatever, as there are huge economic, social and cultural impacts. To see each fèis on a sound financial footing, that would be a real benefit; people wouldn’t have to organise coffee mornings to raise funds in order to keep their culture alive. Local fèisean for adults might be a good thing; the adult Fèis Rois is huge, perhaps other places might not do it on the same scale but something like evening sessions for adults could be built into the main fèis programme. It doesn’t need to be separate to main fèis resourcing and timetabling.

Personally, I will be eternally grateful to the fèis movement for how it has affected me and my professional development. When I came out of the Battlefield Band as a performer, I was known as a performer, which was fine, but coming out of a band like that and establishing yourself as a soloist takes time. For two years I would be phoning round introducing myself, saying ‘its
Dougie Pincock, and they would say ‘who?’ and I would say ‘I used to be with the Battlefield Band’; and they would say, ‘oh, right.’ And a couple of years later I would be phoning saying, ‘it’s Dougie Pincock’ and they would say ‘oh hi Dougie, how’re you doing?’ A lot of that was due to the working with different fèisèan; the reputation I had expanded a lot faster in the Highlands than in the rest of the country because of the work I was doing with the fèis movement. I’ll always be grateful for that. And I’ll always be grateful for what I learned from great people; it was a privilege to work with people like Jim Hunter, Terry Small, Charlie MacLeod, Val Bryan, Corrina Hewat, loads of others, all learning together. A lot of formal and informal tutor feedback, where people would talk about problems encountered in classes; a lot of the things we chatted about and had blethers about have become established policy in some fèisèan. I will always be grateful to those people for that and for some great times, great crack, brilliant sessions, learning a lot about music too from different tutors. It was a very enriching period, the early to mid nineties. Definitely without the fèis movement, I wouldn’t be here; I wouldn’t be where I am today.

We don’t start by saying we’re going to create great art, although that is not to say that great art isn’t created.

FRANK MCCONNELL:
Dance Tutor

I’ve worked with a few different fèisèan, Fèis Rois, Fèis nan Garbh-Chrìochan, and Cèol nam Fèis, teaching dancing and step dancing. I would teach any kind of dancing, I love dancing.

One year at the Gairloch fèis, when there was an exchange programme with some Irish students, one of them said to Iain MacDonald, Iain the Whaler: ‘so what is it that you’re teaching these people?’ Iain replied ‘I don’t teach them what I know; I teach them what it is that they’ve come to learn.’ In saying that, he was talking about a way of educating people where the teacher is a learner too. He wasn’t interested in just stuffing tunes into young people; he was talking about working with the learner’s interests, trying to find out what it is that young people want to know and how to help them learn. That way of teaching isn’t to do with his own preference in music or his particular opinion, although as a great musician, he has every right to have an opinion. I suspect he’s not alone in thinking that way.

In my experience of working in different fèisèan, I think as much as it’s great fun, at the base of it there’s a real intellectual rigour about ‘what is our identity as a people?’ and that’s connected to Gaelic language, to the musical expression of the Gaelic language and the dance expression of the Gaelic language. Much as we like to think what a huge growth there’s been in the fèis movement, young people in Scotland want to know what is their cultural identity, what is their cultural history, and they want to know that without having to ask intellectual questions or have great debates. That’s what I think underpins the fèis movement.

In terms of the work that I do with Dannsa, I have a winter dance class in Ardross that’s gone on for the last twelve years. After ten years, suddenly it’s really taken off; anything between forty and sixty people come every week. It’s taken ten years to get to that. Funders need to know that, it can take ten years for something to develop to that stage; you can’t just put money into something for a few years then walk away and expect that something will continue. What motivated us in Dannsa, when we hit on this notion of performing old Scotch reels and step dancing, was understanding that these dances came from a social context; it was an opportunity for people to meet socially and communally. We don’t start by saying we’re
going to create great art, although that is not to say that great art isn’t created.

Particularly in the last ten years, although not so much in the fèis movement, I’ve seen people in traditional music trying to create great art; and performing in concerts, they can be very slick and up to the moment, but they’ve forgotten the social context in which the music was created. I honestly believe in the significance of social context. Take that away, and you lose something vital.

There’s part of me that thinks, ‘it gets the music out there, it creates employment’, and then there’s part of me that prefers traditional singers and musicians, who still understand that whole thing of ‘it’s the song, not the singer, it’s the communication, not the way you put it across’, these things are much more important. Although I’m open to these things, it’s not the way you put it across.

I think that Gaelic underpins everything. I don’t know if I would have said that ten or fifteen years ago. Now I can go to a traditional music concert, and can tell within half a minute whether or not a musician is Gaelic speaking. I’m not judging if one’s better than the other, although there are young bands who are fantastic and should be Gaelic speakers, it would help them with the music. I’m not fluent yet although it’s taken me years and years to get to the stage I’m at. My mother was a Gaelic speaker who moved back to Uist when she was five. There was always Gaelic spoken in the home, but I was of a generation where people did not believe that Gaelic would do any good, and the children were discouraged from using the language. I had always had an interest in Gaelic but it wasn’t until I started step dancing in 1992 or 1993 that I felt a real affinity with the language. I’m a dancer, and dance became a way into the language, a way of connecting with a whole culture, that just clicked. That’s when I felt some bitterness that the language was being wiped out, but I felt that at least I could start now, I can learn the language.

Some argue that the fèisean haven’t contributed anything to Gaelic, but I think that if they open doors into the language, that’s a start. I don’t care how much money that the government have spent on Gaelic: Runrig and Capercaillie have done more for Gaelic language than any other subsidised programme. Why do thousands of people in Germany want to learn Gaelic, if not for Runrig, they’ve got a huge market there. When I was 15 years old, Runrig did have a huge market in Scotland — to begin with they played every other week in Benbecula. Then they grew more popular and played bigger concerts like Loch Lomond. If the Scottish Arts Council or Highlands and Islands Development Board had backed Runrig at the time, that would have been a worthwhile investment. There’s still not enough support for artists and performers in the Highlands and Islands.

Traditional music in schools would take a long time to introduce into the system. It has to be taught in teacher training courses first, and within schools it has to have a supportive environment. The whole attitude and approach to teaching music, dance, traditional and Gaelic arts and culture has to change in a deep and meaningful sense before it can be fed into the school system. Again it’s to do with the quality of teaching.

Not all great musicians are great teachers. When I was at school, I did the poetry of Edwin Morgan, and years later meeting him, and thinking he was a thoroughly nice man, it was great finding out that a hero was also a decent human being. But I suppose this isn’t always the case with heroes. I think that the notion of role models is not necessarily valid in itself; good teaching is about far more than that. For example Michael MacGoldrick came to teach at the adult Fèis Rois two years ago, and before he came he inundated Rita with questions about the level of the people he was going to teach, and what they wanted to do. Rita suggested that he plan classes to cope with complete beginner or the more experienced player. So when he turned up, he had planned ten tunes for the complete beginner, ten tunes for intermediate players and ten tunes that would really challenge the advanced player. At the end of the weekend he produced a CD for all his students, of him playing all thirty tunes, slow, medium and fast and he gave this to each student. He didn’t know if he’s a good tutor or not because he’s rarely taught before — but that was what makes Michael MacGoldrick such a fantastic musician and tutor.

And going back to the way Iain MacDonald summed it up — if you try and find out what it is that people want to know, to me that’s key to the whole thing.

**ALPHA MUNRO:**

*Kiltearn Fiddlers, Fèis Rois*

I was fortunate to have been taught traditional fiddle by the renowned late Donald Riddell of Kirkhill, fiddle player, composer, teacher and fiddle maker. It was Donald who inspired me to teach and to lead the Kiltearn Fiddlers. He taught, mainly, by ear, telling stories about the tune’s many phrases. The visual pictures, which carried the notes, were unforgettable. As one of his pupils, it was only after one...
had learnt the majority of his sets by ear, with the music by heart, that one was allowed to join his Highland Strathspey and Reel Society. This discipline has stayed with me and performance without music has always been a yardstick for the Kiltearn Fiddlers.

I became a tutor with Feis Rois in 1989, and the following January, set up the Kiltearn Primary School weekly traditional fiddle class. At that time the classes were termed follow-on classes because they were intended to benefit children who had started learning fiddle at the Feis. However, these classes also welcomed complete beginners. I started with three Evanton children: Simon Fraser, Andrew MacRorie and Helen McCabe. Soon the class doubled, quadrupled and has steadily increased ever since, to 60 in 2004. My work with the Kiltearn Fiddlers and the Feis has been an inspiration to me on many levels. It has encouraged me to develop my own musical skills and teaching techniques as well as experiment with new ideas, latterly improvisation. It has led to the development of a beginners Fiddle Tutor book, Oideachadh nam Feis: Scottish Fiddle Music for Beginners. It has proved my beliefs in the benefits of community music.

It has convinced me that traditional music in modern society offers huge social, psychological, emotional and educational benefits to all ages in an area where cultural roots are still vibrant. Participation in traditional music provides musical identity and helps our systems adjust to the background’s linguistic vibration. The Feis movement is the movement for our time, not only here but also as a model for cultures abroad.

FIONA MACKENZIE:
Main Mhor Gaelic Song Fellow

I first became involved in the local Feis Rois in 1995 when I attended the Feis Inbhich in Dingwall Primary School for the first time. I had begun to sing Gaelic that year with Dingwall Gaelic Choir and wanted to study more in depth. I remember that it was a great weekend, studying with Arthur Cormack and Cathy Ann MacPhee, and I felt as if a whole new world was opening up for me! At that time, classes were held in the school and the sessions and ceilidhs were in Tulloch Castle – the huge number of present participants of the Feis Inbhich wouldn’t even be able to get in the door now, let alone have a session!! In 1995 we were all able to have coffee...
break in the staff room at the same time!
After my first fèis I was inspired to learn more of the culture and, in particular, to learn the Gaelic language, so I enrolled in an immersion course at Inverness College for two years. Meanwhile, our children began their education in the Gaelic Medium Education Unit at the Primary School.

Around this time, I also joined the committee for Feis Rois and thoroughly enjoyed learning more about the organisation and watching it grow over the years. Having seen at first hand the benefits of being a part of the feis movement, I was keen to involve my children and so, over the years, all three have learned to play instruments at fèis classes and attended junior and senior Feisean. My eldest daughter has now been accepted to study Gaelic song and clarsach at the Gaelic College for Feis Lathama in Oban.
The feis is particularly important when it comes to the preservation and propagation of Gaelic in the community as it very much helps to keep the profile of the language up and also demonstrates to all ages, but particularly to the young, that Gaelic and its culture are cool. Audiences come to know the work of the feis movement and what they do and young people in particular gain from being involved in the activities. It is also very important as it provides a platform for the music stars of the future and enables them to gain enormous confidence in performing through the opportunities offered to them. I have always been particularly struck by the confidence evident in young feis participants, much more so than we ever had at their age!
The feis movement deserves to have more money invested in it, even if for no other reason than the work it does for helping to preserve and promote our national identity of which we are justifiably proud. We should also remember the career opportunities which are open to young people through the work of the feis, not just in performing but in arts administration too. I believe that in another 25 years time, the work of Feis nan Gaidheal will be of prime importance in the profile of Scotland worldwide, economically and artistically and will take a leading role in the traditional music scene across the world.

LOUISE MACKENZIE:
Fiddle Tutor
While I was in my last year at school, I went to the first Feis Rois in 1986. In High School, my music teacher, Christine Martin was really encouraging towards traditional music. Before the feis, I’d been going to Shetland to have fiddle lessons from Tom Anderson and had also been to Stirling University summer schools. These were residential schools with tuition in traditional music and Gaelic song, open to both children and adults, which was excellent. But coming to the first Feis Rois was fantastic, all these wonderful kids, all playing traditional music. It was very exciting, everyone was so enthusiastic. We stayed in the Bunkhouse at The Ceilidh Place; there was lots of fun and shenanigans.

One of my best memories of that feis was Gaelic singing with Kathleen MacDonald, she was such an inspiration to make you go up there and sing. One of the wonderful things about being involved in the feis is that when you go from fèis to fèis, you meet a lot of different tutors, and make new friends, for example I met Cathy Anne MacPhee at Feis Rois in about 1987 and we’ve been friends since then. Another advantage was that the feis allowed you to try things out for the first time, whether that was experimenting with new tunes or arrangements, or trying new instruments. I assisted Anne Hughes at Feis Rois one year then at Feis an Earrach the following year. I would say that the feis has had a huge influence on increasing the popularity and availability of traditional music in schools.

I think that the success of the feisean probably influenced the setting up of job, which ran for three years and was supported by Skye and Lochalsh Enterprise. It involved organising events in Skye and Lochalsh, including traditional music concerts, festivals, and marketing a wide range of events that were organised in the area. Having that job has allowed me to stay in the Highlands and to work in the part of Scotland where I come from, and as a musician it is tremendous to have the opportunity to work full-time in the field of traditional music. I don’t think that would have happened without the feisean.

WENDY STEWART:
Musician and Clarsach Tutor
My first involvement with the feis movement was at Plockton in 1989 and it probably shaped my way of teaching forever. I met Cathy Anne MacPhee, Andy Thorburn and Dougie Pincock and learned as much from the students themselves. I saw how well a non-competitive, nurturing environment works in getting youngsters to try a completely new creative form. It stimulated me to think and rethink ways of teaching to communicate this to very mixed ability groups! The most memorable tune I made up to help with this was wonderfully titled by the kids in Portree one year, when the film of the moment was ‘A Fish called Wanda’ – a feis called Wendy? – ‘Fish Feis’!

DOUGIE BECK:
Drama Tutor
I work with the Meanbh-chuileag Theatre in Education Company, and also teach at the feisean; last year I took the drama classes at Feis Thiriodh, and helped out with the Gaelic song class. My first experience of going to a feis was Feis Rois in 1989, which helped me with my piping. There is a policy that says that a feis is a Gaelic festival where Gaelic culture is central and that a feis couldn’t exist without it. Feis Rois found a way of making the language relevant to the children by having them discuss what the area would be like if Gaelic had never existed in that part of the country. After a while the children began to see how place-names, personal names and politics could be different, and how it was important to the area. I believe that people can come to the language through an interest in music, and I would fall into this category myself.

Fellow – a post designed to promote and encourage participation in Gaelic song throughout the Highlands. Through this post I am able to give something back to the feis, in return for all that I have learned from the feis itself over the years by tutoring in song and Gaelic for the various feisean. I have taught song for Feis Rois in many schools in Ross-shire and thoroughly enjoyed doing so and I have also taught master classes in Gaelic song for Feis Lathama in Oban.

The feis is particularly important when it comes to the preservation and propagation of Gaelic in the community as it very much helps to keep the profile of the language up and also demonstrates to all ages, but particularly to the young, that Gaelic and its culture are cool. Audiences come to know the work of the feis movement and what they do and young people in particular gain from being involved in the activities. It is also very important as it provides a platform for the music stars of the future and enables them to gain enormous confidence in performing through the opportunities offered to them. I have always been particularly struck by the confidence evident in young feis participants, much more so than we ever had at their age!
The feis movement deserves to have more money invested in it, even if for no other reason than the work it does for helping to preserve and promote our national identity of which we are justifiably proud. We should also remember the career opportunities which are open to young people through the work of the feis, not just in performing but in arts administration too. I believe that in another 25 years time, the work of Feis nan Gaidheal will be of prime importance in the profile of Scotland worldwide, economically and artistically and will take a leading role in the traditional music scene across the world.

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Sometimes people see something working in another fèis and will try it out in their own — and why not?

DONALD BLACK:
Mouth Organ Player and Tutor
When I was four, I was given my first mouth organ, and since then I’ve never been without a ‘moothie’. My mother was very musical and could knock out a tune on the mouthorgan and button box as far back as I can remember. Born in Benderloch in Argyll, and coming from a family where piping was always to the fore, she adored Highland music, and I certainly took my love of Gaelic and pipe music from her. I never took moothie playing seriously, until I was asked by Phil Cunningham to do a spot on the Talla a’ Bhaile TV programme. I recorded my first album Westwinds with Greentrax Records, and contacted people all over to arrange bookings. The very first people to respond were the Fèis Thiriodh organisers, who kindly invited me over to participate in their 1995 fèis. Since then, I’ve played all across Scotland and the UK, in Russia, Lithuania, Germany, Denmark and Italy, as well as at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and at Celtic Connections, sometimes with multi-instrumentalist Malcolm Jones or with Lewis-born guitarist Donnie MacKenzie. With two successful albums in the bag, and regular TV and radio performances, I can look back on the last ten years with pride. I will never forget that the people who helped me get started were the committee of Fèis Thiriodh.

WILMA KENNEDY:
Gaelic Singer and Drama Tutor
It’s not just the tutors that make the fèis work. The tutors are there for the kids, for teaching and performing, but it’s the huge support network that’s round a fèis that is vital. It’s the people making the sandwiches for lunchtime, those who’re making the cups of tea at break time, or chasing up the kids who’re lost and making sure they get to the right class, or picking up children and bringing them to the fèis. Those are the people, the unnamed masses of support staff, of family and friends that make the fèisean successful. Tutors are employed to be there, the people who make a fèis work are there because they want to be there, and their worth is priceless. The amount of work that they do is sometimes not recognised enough, because everything usually does go like clockwork; it’s not until they stop doing it that you finally realise how much some people actually do.

That’s how any fèis will become successful; it’s that willingness, the voluntary hours of time that local people put into motivating and inspiring a community, and inspiring kids, that creates a fèis. Unless you have that nucleus of people, you won’t get a fèis to work. That’s how the fèisean have spread. It was a kind of infection that took over the whole of the western seaboard, in a way that the next island would say ‘we can do that!’ People would go to a fèis and say ‘this is tremendous, look what it’s giving to that community.’ It’s about giving a community a sense of self-worth and recognising the strengths of the people that are within a community, recognising the people who have skills, who have knowledge, and those who are able to pass on knowledge were able to channel their knowledge in a really positive way to people, and rather than teaching one or two, they were teaching dozens of children. Even if a half dozen of those children are able to keep that instrument going, you’ve passed on your knowledge; you’ve succeeded in sharing whatever special gift you have, you are able to pass on to others, and that is invaluable in any community. So anyone coming in seeing this happening would say, ‘that’s...
Duncan Johnstone composed a tune, Duncan Johnstone composed a tune;
Duncan Johnstone, Duncan Johnstone, Duncan Johnstone composed a tune.

And they all played Farewell to Nigg; and they all played Farewell to Nigg
And they played it and they slayed it, and they all played Farewell to Nigg!

which was of course set to the tune Farewell to Nigg. It went on and on. All the charters and all the kids, their faces puce with the effort of trying to blow, the charters all slightly out from each other, the kids all frantically trying to play their tune. It’s one of these sounds, I can hear it clearly!

For some fèisean, the final day or the final night concert differs, there’s a huge variation. It’s a matter of choice what each feis decides to do and I think that’s right. It means that each is unique in its own way, particular to their area. Sometimes people see something working in another feis and will try it out in their own - and why not? Committees can take ideas on board and change things, or say ‘no, we don’t want to do it that way’; what’s great is their right to do it their way. What we need for our island, our community, our kids, realising how important it was to a community to give certain people status and respect within it.

I suppose some of the fèisean I’ve worked with, Feis Thirioth, for example, are successful because the classes go on all year long. A feis usually runs for a week, although the Barra feis was a fortnight - oh, the madness of the fortnight! You would collapse half way through the first week, lose your voice, get it back by Monday and just about be in recovery by the following week. I know some tutors have had fèis burnout, where they go from feis to feis and at the end of it, they’re a ghost of their former selves, completely hyper from teaching and performing and having the most amazing time. They would be as useful as a chocolate teapot by the end of the summer! Or they might get the most amazing time.

Tiree doesn’t have a final concert, for example; their feeling is that there’s an opportunity for children to play at functions throughout the year. They have  a tutors’ ceilidh and a ‘sharing’ of what everyone has learned on the Friday afternoon, and the only onus on the tutors is then to share as much as possible with students. The kids don’t need to achieve ‘perfection’ by the end of the week. For some kids, the pressure of going on stage can be quite nerve-wracking and performance can be a skill in its own right. For some drama tutors too this can be difficult with different plays, some with native Gaelic speakers and some with learners. Sometimes drama is a useful way of teaching the language. If you’re lucky, the feis may have enough Gaelic speaking children to make a class and then you can have a proper drama class, with improvisation and so on.

A lot of the fèisean would work on that for three weeks every summer, for a period of five years. It was for seniors, sixteen to twenty-five year olds, and it was the next stage on from doing drama at a feis. I would say that was very significant. Sometimes they drop out at secondary age so having somewhere for seniors is particularly useful. It was a project run by the National Gaelic Arts Project and it had some superb tutors doing some inspired work, for example Phillip Howard, who was the Artistic Director at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, and Dr Finlay MacLeod was the writer one year. I was involved in Ordag Is Sgealabag for two years and that was tremendous; touring round schools it was amazing what a powerful tool drama is for learning to work with Gaelic and working with children. It expands the mind, the imagination and it is so effortless for children to become involved in the ideas. Meabh-chuileag, the Theatre in Education Company formed as part of Fèisean nan Gàidheal have taken over the reins of Ordag Is Sgealabag.

At that time I was at the end of my second year studying a BEd in Drama in Wales and I had to get the last two weeks of college off and, because it was about teaching, I was allowed to go. It meant that when I was only twenty, I was passing on the knowledge that I was learning at college to people of more or less the same age as me. It was great, the imagination, the creativity of those years was profound. Iain Finlay MacLeod, who’s written novels and plays for the Traverse: Tony Kearney in ‘River City’; there are people who came from that experience and have forged themselves a career: D.W. Stewart, Carina MacLeod, Arthur Donald, Derek ‘Pluto’.

I’m tutoring at the National School of Excellence now, and it’s harder to fit in the fèisean as well. I still do Tiree if possible and do music and drama workshops there through the year. I don’t think the music school would be able to exist were it not for the feis movement. Twenty-five years of inspiring kids; you’ve got to be able to give them somewhere to take their music to a higher level. Certain fèisean are able to do that, and certain kids need that extra tuition. Going on to the course like the Scottish Music Course at RSAMD, I don’t think you can underestimate the importance of how the fèisean movement has influenced a nation of young people over the past twenty five years. It’s inspired and affected a great number of young people who are now performing, in the public eye doing music. I bet if you asked a lot of the young people in bands have they ever been to a feis, there would be a really high percentage who would say ‘yeah’ and would smile!
Twenty-five years ago, there were no féisean, nor were there opportunities to study traditional music in further or higher education in Scotland. From one initiative in Barra, there are now over forty community-based organisations developing high standards of Gaelic music and arts tuition across the country. The féis movement has helped to influence the development of a National School of Excellence in Traditional Music; several further education courses and the BA/BA (Hons) in Scottish Traditional Music at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama. There are traditional arts projects in Scotland, Canada and the USA, all based on the model of the féisean.

A key feature of the féisean is music-making. The 2005 MORI report Being Young in Scotland indicates that from ages 14-16, young people are twice as likely to participate in making music as going to a youth club. In general participation in arts activities, 57% of young people were more likely to participate if they knew their friends were also involved.

The Scottish Arts Council’s 2003 national audit of youth music in Scotland, What’s Going On? indicated that around 60,000 young people take part in music activities each week, and 100,000 more would take part if given the opportunity. Positive aspects of youth music were identified as a thriving traditional music scene and a hugely enthusiastic response from young people themselves towards music-making. The report estimated that weekly, around 8,800 young people participated in traditional music compared with 5,800 participating in western classical music and 5,200 in rock, pop or dance music.
When I was in school, which isn’t that long ago, it was so not cool to play the pipes, it was so very uncool to sing Gaelic

A 2005 study of the impact of feisean on young people: The Participants’ Story: attitudinal research on the feis movement in Scotland, commissioned by Feisean nan Gàidheal and conducted by Stephen Broad and Jacqueline France for the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama’s National Centre for Research in the Performing Arts, suggested that the feisean can influence young people’s choice of study, career, location and their motivation to learn Gaelic.

From a sample of 1,000 feis participants, 200 responded. 50% reported that the feis was a positive influence on their choice of career or study and 76% said that the feisean had been a positive influence on their motivation to learn Gaelic. Case study interviews with thirteen young people emphasised the social, musical and cultural importance of the movement, in introducing young people to music; initiating and fostering friendships and encouraging and enabling an interest and pride in Gaelic.

Extracts from interviews with participants are summarised here.

JULIE FOWLIS:
Julie Fowlis from North Uist is a successful Gaelic singer and instrumentalist who has been described as ‘a revelation’. Voted as Gaelic Singer of the Year 2005 at the Scottish Traditional Music Awards, Julie was the winner of the BBC Radio 2 Horizon Award 2006 for best emerging artist and released her first solo album mar a tha mo chridhe. Julie worked with Feis Alba while studying her degree in music at the University of Strathclyde. She completed the Gaelic immersion course at Sabhal Mor Ostaig and worked as Education Development Officer for Feis Rois, helping to co-ordinate the first Ceilidh Trail.

Julie attended Feis Tir an Eòrna when she was nine.

‘As a child, you were just in it because it was great fun, you didn’t really realise what an impact it was having on you. Coming back to it later, I’m seeing people studying music who were just beginning when I started working with the feisean eight years ago – now you can see them coming through the music course at university and becoming performers themselves. The feis has done a power of good, not only for the culture and the music but for the language as well, making it accessible to young people. When I was in school, which isn’t that long ago, it was so not cool to play the pipes, it was so very uncool to sing Gaelic. I mean you just didn’t admit it to anybody and you would get a slagging for taking your pipes out or wearing the kilt or anything like that and you got a hard time for it. But now it’s kind of different, it’s kind of cool and trendy to be doing that kind of thing. It’s really a big thing.

I ended up going to the feis because my mother was involved with it, but that didn’t stop me enjoying it! It was good. I really enjoyed it. From then on I knew I always wanted to speak Gaelic. I didn’t have any sense of it as an endangered language but I knew it was something to be proud of and always wished I’d had the chance to speak it. I remember a feis tutor, Davie MacLennan, saying: ‘you’ve got to keep up with your Gaelic.’ I think that was probably one of the things that got me more into Gaelic, to be encouraged like that.

It’s been important for me because of my development as a Gaelic speaker. It gave me something that made Gaelic seem like a rich, viable, vibrant thing, that was alive and it was a great thing for me to learn and would be of great value to me, personally and spiritually. It was very relevant to me. It’s highly important for people to understand where they’ve come from, anywhere in the world. If a tree doesn’t have roots it dies, and it’s the same with people really.

I think the feis as an instrument for young people meeting outside school is probably the most invaluable tool in Scotland today, especially in the Highlands. I can’t think of anything else similar to it; it’s an unbelievable tool for social capital. You bump into someone or you’re at an event, and it doesn’t have to be deep or profound; but you’ve got a connection with this person. You can walk in and just get the craic with someone as if you’ve never been away…that for me is the key to it, that’s the important thing.

If there was no feis, my life would be entirely different. I can’t think back over my personal life history over the last twelve years without thinking that the feis has had a very big role to
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LINDSAY DUNBAR:
Lindsay Dunbar works full-time as Project Co-ordinator with Feis Rois, which she first attended aged nine.

‘I think I honestly went just for the crack because everybody else from the village was getting to go, so I wanted to go too. It was quite nice in Achiltibuie because we were such a small community. A couple of people who were in the year above me had gone the year before and come back saying it was great, so of course everybody in my year all wanted to go. The Gaelic language classes I always found particularly interesting. I think for a long time while we were at the féis it didn’t seem clear in my mind why we were having a half-hour class every day, but as you get older you suddenly realise what it’s all about and if you’re doing Gaelic song, or doing a tune which has got a Gaelic name, then it all starts to relate. Gaelic song is a brilliant way of introducing children to the language. I think it can’t be overestimated what the féis movement’s done for children socially, especially in a place like the Highlands; it must be the same in small island communities as well. It’s an incredible feeling when you meet somebody who’s from up here and you say ‘oh did you go to the féis?’ and they go, ‘oh yeah, I was at the féis too’ and automatically you have this bond, even though you might have nothing else in common. You realise you were both in Lilla pool this one week in your entire life at the same time and you might even have been in the same class…it’s brilliant.

We are all teetering towards our thirties now and yet we still all look back on it with very fond memories. We still have very fresh memories of our social lives when we were nine to twelve years old. I think the féis is really important because it helps people understand their identity and their history…the féis is helping promote language and culture and music. The féis movement is about Gaelic in Scotland, but other cultures should look at the movement as a model for their own cultural awareness and teaching. You want to start young with good education, so teaching young children about the language and the music and the culture is how to get it planted in their minds as something they might want to explore as they get older. I think definitely the féis movement is central to that. I think we need to keep looking at how the Gaelic language is presented, how it’s used, how it’s taught and showing children that there’s a future in it as well, I think that’s very important. I think we should be a lot more supportive of people who are willing to experiment and explore and learn and pick up on the language. Although it is more cool now to speak Gaelic, at the same time, children are still quite happy to talk in English once they walk out of the classroom, so it’s all about making it relevant. That’s why the féis is so good, because it’s not inside a classroom, it’s during the holidays and tutors and young people are talking with them in Gaelic and I think that’s what could make it a very successful project in the future.’

LAUREN TAIT:
Lauren Tait from Fort William has completed the Gaelic course at Sabhal Mor Ostaig and is about to study clàrsach and piano on the BA (Hons) in Scottish Music at RSAMD. She first went to Feis Lochabair aged eight, having begun to learn the chanter and because all her friends went and it was something to do in the Easter holidays. Having attended fèisean for ten years, Lauren took part in the 2005 Lochaber Ceilidh Trail.

‘I always loved the féis. I used to start looking forward to the féis at Christmas time. It was never just about playing music. You were playing games to do with music and I just really enjoyed it and all my friends enjoyed it as well. I was totally into traditional music. I played six or seven instruments, and used to go and set them out in my living room and go round and play each one, one after the other, just spend a whole day practicing and that was the féis that did that. I used to go to féis classes for piping, accordion and group work with the clarsach, and used to look like a traveller because I’d have all these instruments all over me! I played those three instruments intensively for a long while. There were two camps, people who played music and people who didn’t. The féis always had a good reputation for being a laugh, where you would get to play music and have a good time. I used to be teased about having music lessons on Saturday and being in the Gaelic choir. But then I could earn more busking than my friends could in their Saturday jobs. I played in the band Blazin’ Fiddles with Ewen and Megan Henderson, and people kept telling me I should play more clarsach. When I first went to the féis I didn’t even know what a clarsach was. When I was about twelve, I just wrote down on a bit of paper to the fèis that I wanted to learn to play the clarsach. The clarsach is my first instrument now. I would never have known what it was if it wasn’t for the féis. I’ve had lots of opportunities with the fèisean, like playing in Harvest at Celtic Connections, and playing support gigs for Capercaillie and Blazin’ Fiddles.'
I’ve got so many friends from the fèis, I cannot actually count how many. Half these people I’d never met before, but because you have the same interests. You’d just say, ‘have you heard this CD?’ You might disagree about other things but music is always the common link, the common bond. I’d probably say that was one of the most valuable points of the fèis, that it does bring friendships together and because of that you do get a lot more out of the music. There’s the edge to it as well, that if you’re playing and you hear somebody playing a tune better than you, you think, I’d better go and play that tune a bit better, but I don’t think that’s a bad thing at all, I think that’s a really good thing. It gives you a new burst of energy too, of everybody playing and getting the crack and then after that you’re totally excited about the music again … and you wanted to do more. The fèis acts like a springboard for young musicians, getting their names known and showcasing them. In High School, I chose Gaelic over French and German, and although I’m not fluent yet, I’m an example of how the fèis introduces you to Gaelic and how I’ve brought it on.’

JENNIFER PORT:

Jennifer Port from Golspie is 23 and works full-time as a musician. She first went to Feis Chataibh aged ten, at the suggestion of a teacher encouraging young musicians to form a band. She was told the fèis would offer a chance to try instruments that might not be available at school. Jennifer later attended Feis Rois and Feis Alba and valued meeting others from different areas. She stays in touch with friends made at the fèis, including Kathleen Graham from Skye with whom she did the BA (Hons) in Scottish Music at RSAMD. After graduating in 2003, Jennifer travelled the world for a year, then set up in business. A highlight of her career was playing at the wedding of Madonna and Guy Ritchie and the christening of their son.

‘The fèis was a great thing to be involved in. I remember having lots of fun trying instruments, some you can play, some you can’t. That was the great thing about the fèis, you came away with sore fingers but you certainly learned a lot. I got the chance to learn by ear and took the music away at the end of the week. I got the chance to be playing alongside other people, because quite often when you are playing an instrument there are not too many other people in your area. I think it’s so important that it’s kept alive and to be given the opportunity, the fèis is hugely important in doing that, getting the Gaelic across to the children. Not just the language, the culture within the music and the dance and arts and crafts too. There are so many things at the fèis now, but I think that as a culture as well as a language, it’s maybe the first opportunity some children are getting to do it at all.

I’m more proud of the fact that I got a degree from RSAMD than that I played for Madonna, to be quite honest … I think that’s probably true because that came from sheer hard work! I would say that certainly a large percentage of what I’ve done is as a direct result of the fèis because I can remember it being really good fun as well as educational. It was something I really enjoyed going to and I got a lot out of it.’

DEIRDRE GRAHAM:

Deirdre Graham is 20, from the world for a year, then set up in business. A highlight of her career was playing at the wedding of Madonna and Guy Ritchie and the christening of their son.

‘The fèis was a great thing to be involved in. I remember having lots of fun trying instruments, some you can play, some you can’t. That was the great thing about the fèis, you came away with sore fingers but you certainly learned a lot. I got the chance to learn by ear and took the music away at the end of the week. I got the chance to be playing alongside other people, because quite often when you are playing an instrument there are not too many other people in your area. I think it’s so important that it’s kept alive and to be given the opportunity, the fèis is hugely important in doing that, getting the Gaelic across to the children. Not just the language, the culture within the music and the dance and arts and crafts too. There are so many things at the fèis now, but I think that as a culture as well as a language, it’s maybe the first opportunity some children are getting to do it at all.

I’m more proud of the fact that I got a degree from RSAMD than that I played for Madonna, to be quite honest … I think that’s probably true because that came from sheer hard work! I would say that certainly a large percentage of what I’ve done is as a direct result of the fèis because I can remember it being really good fun as well as educational. It was something I really enjoyed going to and I got a lot out of it.’
Megan and Ewen Henderson:
Megan and Ewen Henderson come from a musical family in Fort William and attended Feis Lochabair, which their father is involved in running. Megan, 16, plays fiddle, accordion, piano and flute. Ewen, 18, plays fiddle, piano and piano. They both play in Broslum, a band they started from the feis, and Ewen plays with The Tassle Bandits. Both have performed in Harvest at Celtic Connections.

Megan: ‘When you’re younger, if you enjoy something, you find it easier to learn, so in a game you’ll pick up Gaelic and probably remember it. It’s magic. (The feis) was just really good fun. You got to meet new friends, got more tunes and each year you could see yourself gradually getting better and the tutors were really helpful as well. I don’t think I would have carried on Gaelic in school, I might have thought ‘why are you bothering – for example putting road signs in Gaelic – it’s a dying language, who cares?’ but all these people that are going to the feis care… and it’s such an important thing because if you lose the language, you lose the songs… and if you lose the songs, you lose the feeling of the music and if you lose that, you lose the culture.

Douglas Beck:
Douglas Beck first attended Feis Rois aged twelve. He now works with the Gaelic Theatre-In- Education Group, Meanbh- chuileag.

‘I was just about to go to the pipes from the chanter and my teacher, Pipe Major Norman Gilleys, said I should go along to the feis. One of my main memories of my first feis was being very tired for the whole week, because it was very intensive. It also did push me on quite a lot musically, to that higher level that I needed. I remember the people who were there who spoke Gaelic were young and cool and hip and trendy… and I was feeling quite cool because I was hanging about with them… that is quite cool because a lot of the slightly older people, like musicians I admired and looked up to, used it. The feis is important in encouraging the use of Gaelic, among many feis goers, it’s trendy, it’s quite cool to be speaking Gaelic. It just makes it seem more alive.’

Ewen: ‘I wanted to learn traditional music at the feis and just get tunes, tunes, tunes. Even if you weren’t particularly good at music, there were things for you to do, activities and games, so it was fun. One of my best friends was probably at the very first feis I went to. You had this common interest you both shared. You could talk to other friends about football and stuff, but then they wouldn’t understand when you were talking about traditional music. I would always need traditional music around me, I don’t know what I would do if I didn’t have that. Not everyone will like Gaelic, not everyone will like traditional music, but unless they try it or check it out, they’re never going to know so it’s great to get them into it in some way.

Laura Green:
Laura Green works full-time for Feis Rois as Education Development Officer. She first went to Feis Rois aged nine.

‘I would meet new friends and have a good time. By the time I got to secondary school I was really motivated and started practising for half an hour, an hour a night. And then by the time we got to Feis Rois, if you went to the master classes, you’d get to go and play at summer ceilidhs. You’d get to play at exciting venues, so then it would motivate you to practise and get better. I think that the feisean and other organisations need to work more closely, to promote Scottish music to the business world as is done in Ireland – we need to sell it.’

Lynne Houston:
Lynne Houston is currently living in South Uist, learning Gaelic and studying HNC Music Performance at Lews Castle College in Benbecula, having attended Feis Chataibh, in Golspie. Lynne sees Gaelic as integral to traditional music.

‘The songs and language go together and one forms a bridge to the other. The whole-feis song, where everyone sings together, they all get into the tune and really belt out the words as well so they’re getting used to the sounds of Gaelic song…it’s such a good start and introduction to the language. It’s inspirational really, the fact that this organisation started 25 years ago with one feis, now there are feisean all over Scotland and all these children are doing traditional music and learning Gaelic who probably wouldn’t have before, because Gaelic has been dying out. Children come home from school and go ‘I don’t want to go back’, they come home from the feis, going ‘when’s my next one, and can I go to the workshops, can I learn the guitar, can I learn the clarsach, can I have a clarsach?… I know there are some people who think ‘why are you bothering – for example putting road signs in Gaelic – it’s a dying language, who cares?’ but all these people that are going to the feis care… and it’s such an important thing because if you lose the language, you lose the songs… and if you lose the songs, you lose the feeling of the music and if you lose that, you lose the culture.’
LAUREN MACCOLL: BBC Radio 2 Young Folk Award Winner, 2004/5. Lauren MacColl from Fortrose is studying fiddle and Gaelic song on the BA (Hons) Scottish Music course at the RSAMD, as well as teaching fiddle to adults and at feisean. She started learning classical violin aged nine, then went to Feis Rois in Ullapool.

‘Everyone I knew went to the feis. Rita Hunter just put leaflets around everyone in the school. I don’t think I knew what to expect, I just knew I’d be playing the violin, I knew there would be a different kind of music and I knew I’d have to pick something else to play as well, which was a bit nerve wracking. I had an instrument but I still hadn’t learned how to use the bow, maybe I didn’t even know the names of the strings by then. It was an eye opening experience, I think because up until then I’d just thought of the violin as being a bit of a chore, but then I saw everyone having so much fun, and I was pleased you could play lots of tunes on the whistle by the end of the week! I couldn’t quite believe that everyone had remembered tunes for the concert at the end of the week and that it all came together suddenly. It was obviously a lot of work and tutors kind of held the concert together, but at the time I just thought it was this big huge thing. We always stayed in the clubhouse and I think that was the main thing, the girls staying six to a room and midnight feasts – the poor supervisors!

I was on the point of giving up aged twelve and then had one-to-one lessons with Louise MacKenzie, then with Iain MacFarlane and Allan Henderson and that was it – there was no giving up. They were quite young people… they were obviously making careers out of it… I could relate to them much better; there was so much fun going on in the class. I think that stuck after that and I was amazed… we learned about ten tunes by the end of the week! I think that was the first time as well that I recognised the different types of tunes and maybe styles… they talked a lot about Highland styles, and about pipe music and ornaments as well. I don’t think I would have been interested if it hadn’t been for that early exposure. It’s in an environment that doesn’t feel like a classroom environment… without the fèis I wouldn’t have carried on with the violin… I wouldn’t have any Gaelic.

What is happening now is probably all down to the feis, although my first violin teacher gave me a good grounding. But I wouldn’t have kept it up; I wouldn’t have known traditional music as I do. I would always say the fèis is my main thing… the thing that I always think of when I think of my childhood or my exposure to music. Music is probably the most important thing for me just now. Winning the BBC Radio 2 Young Folk Award in December has given me focus; I’m aiming for a career combining performance with teaching. I think the fèis movement can only expand. It’s great to see things going full circle, like myself and others teaching. Young people are learning without realising it. They are very dismissive… they’ve just learned three new tunes… but they know them, they’re there and they can play them really well… and they will look back on it and see it as a good experience.

Young players are benefiting from the opportunities the movement offers, including feis concerts. I remember playing at Eden Court when I was thirteen and being put forward for Phil Cunningham’s Young at Heart involving different feisean. I think opportunities like that… are a valuable thing, exposing people to performing as well as getting people to get up and introduce tunes. There’s always people like Phil… you know they’re really successful but they come back and have a tune with you when you’re young and that means quite a lot. I think it’s an important thing to deliver Gaelic to people who would not generally be from a Gaelic speaking background… also, because Gaelic’s in this situation where it must be saved… instead of just pushing it on people and getting them to learn it, it’s a very natural way to absorb it, through a feis.’
RACHEL NEWTON:
Rachel Newton went to the Gaelic medium school in Edinburgh, spending family holidays in Achiltibuie and attending Feis Rois from age 9 to 16. After being involved in the Feis Rois Ceilidh Trail for four years, Rachel and fellow players Fraya Thomsen and Lynsey Payne, formed the band Cloud Nine. Rachel is currently doing the BMus Traditional Music Course at Newcastle University, and was a finalist in the 2005 BBC Radio Scotland Young Traditional Musician of the Year.

I particularly remember performing the Feis song on Loch Broom FM. I just totally loved the Feis, loved it so much, it was always awful at the end when you had to go home. The main benefit was learning from other musicians, tutors and other participants, soaking up what they were doing and playing with them. This contact is one of the things that’s influenced me most as a musician. You just think, am I the only person interested in this sort of music, you know, how uncool am I… but you go to a Feis and you realise there’s lot of teenagers really into it as well and I think it really is a great thing.

If I hadn’t gone to the Feis, I don’t really know where I would be now. I can’t really imagine what I would be doing, I don’t know if I’d be doing music at all. I would maybe be doing it as a hobby but I don’t know if I would be studying it at degree level, because the Feis was what kept me interested in music. You went to the Feis and you remembered the reason why you did music, just because it was so fun and sociable as well. Some kids really take it on and just love it. I’ve seen kids really getting into Gaelic. I just see it getting more and more popular, with loads and loads of kids going to it. From my own experience of teaching at the Feis, the kids keep coming up and saying how much they love it, and they’re definitely coming back next year and they bring a lot of their own friends and every year there’s more and more people. I think it is relevant to more and more young people as time goes by, that thing of people really getting into traditional music and also being introduced to it. Just going along and learning about a new culture, their own culture. So I would definitely say it was relevant in that way. The Feis turns it into fun and recreation and something that you go to and really enjoy. And although you’re actually learning a lot, it’s like a holiday and you’re meeting other people. There’s nothing better really than playing along with other people and getting enjoyment from the sound you’re making and everyone’s making as a whole. And that is the main enjoyment I’ve had from the Feis, that was where I first had that experience properly.

The RSAMD study suggests that three key themes emerge from the case studies: music, Gaelic and friendship. The study indicates that for these young people, the Feis have had an impact on their views about Gaelic, on opportunities to explore and develop their skills in musicianship, and on their choice of study and of career. An additional benefit lies in the bonds and networks created between young people from different areas and age groups who get to know each other through the Feis.

Resulting from these friendships, from group work at Feis Ceoil and the Ceilidh Trail initiatives, many successful young bands are emerging from the Feis movement, including Croft No 5, Fire in the Bog, Back of the Moon, the Anna Massie Band, Broslam, Cloud Nine and The Tassle Bandits. Two of these bands are reviewed here:

ROBERT LIVINGSTONE:
Director of Hi Arts

Every year Highland Council and Eden Court Theatre jointly organise a grand jamboree called Rhythms of the North, featuring the best young musicians, in all styles, from schools around the Highlands. This is always an exciting, even inspiring, event, but one year there was one band who just blew everybody else off the stage. They were a bunch of teenage lads from outside Inverness who played under the name of Dryzabone. They coupled tremendous energy and showmanship with a secure technique and real musicianship. Most of the bands who play those school gigs don’t survive beyond the end of school life – Dryzabone did. But they changed their name – to Croft No 5, one of the liveliest and most inventive bands on the Scottish music scene. For me, Croft No 5 symbolised so much of what’s good about the Feis movement: a sense that traditional music is ‘cool’, a sense of good musicianship, a commitment to performing which can survive the upheavals of leaving school, starting college or work, moving away, and a sense of looking forward as well as back, ensuring that traditional music has a living future.

JOHN SAICH:

Cloud Nine are a natural and evolutionary product of the Feis Rois Ceilidh Trail – the four girls, Rachel Newton, Mairearad Green, Lynsey Payne and Fraya Thomsen all met as a band on last year’s Trail. For anyone who hasn’t experienced a Ceilidh Trail concert, it is a jaw-dropping showcase of some of the youngest, most talented singers and instrumentalists you’ll ever see in one room. As a visitor from the Netherlands said, ‘this is why we came to Scotland’. It’s also why I, and many musicians of my generation, have to go home and practice. Cloud Nine are the best possible example of the process. Individually they have performing experience well beyond their years, and are all veterans of the Feis. Mairearad Green is a former pupil at the Centre of Excellence in Traditional Music, Plockton, and was a finalist in the Young Traditional Musician of the Year competition at Celtic Connections, 2001. The Ceilidh Trail tour is providing an excellent opportunity for the band to refine their music collectively, and also inspire the younger supporting musicians into the bargain.

I think it is relevant to more and more young people as time goes by, that thing of people realising they’re not alone in their love of traditional music.

7. Feis impacts
social and economic impacts of the fèisean

...some research studies indicate that the fèisean may offer wider social and economic benefits to areas where they are situated.

In addition to social benefits and skills in Gaelic, music and other arts, some research studies indicate that the fèisean may offer wider social and economic benefits to areas where they are situated. In this section, Dr Douglas Chalmers, who has carried out extensive research into the impacts of Gaelic arts, contributes some findings from his research to this celebratory publication. Kate Martin concludes this chapter with a brief overview of key research on the fèisean.

DR DOUGLAS CHALMERS:
Lecturer in Business Economics and Enterprise, Glasgow Caledonian University

Just over 10 years ago in 1995, as part of a larger research study at Glasgow Caledonian University, I undertook a comprehensive survey of the then existing fèisean with the aim of establishing how those involved felt they were impacting on their local communities, on those taking part or attending, and on the use of the Gaelic language. As the responses came in it was clear that together with other Gaelic arts and cultural events, those taking part believed the fèisean had the potential to be life changing – and offered many examples of how their local activities had had an effect well beyond what might have been imagined, given their often small size.

Twenty fèisean were asked to take part in the research and thirteen did so – a response rate of almost two-thirds, which allowed some confidence that the results might reasonably be taken as representative of the overall situation. Some of the points from this early research show how, even ten years ago, the deep potential of the fèisean movement was beginning to be recognised. Even then, the range of activities indicated a real richness of experience – ranging from tuition in singing, music, drama, poetry, various instruments and finally a range of sports, notably shiny, and traditional crafts. Formats differed quite widely, from being built around a core of weekend activities to fortnight long events, some providing adult as well as child-oriented activities, some providing evening classes and Saturday morning workshops, and some with follow-up tuition classes, new weekend master classes and summer ceilidhs.

One of my aims was to try and encompass both the ‘economic’ impact and the longer term impact on communities in terms of cohesion and community confidence. In this it was soon made clear that those taking part rejected any attempt to narrowly calculate the impact only in terms of money or a narrow vision of economics.

Having said that, as the figures began to emerge, it was soon clear that a positive economic impact argument could indeed be made, even in the absence of exact and comprehensive figures – but the point was well made that fèisean activities (like much of the other arts) could not be reduced to a balance sheet alone.

Looking at how organising a local fèis led to greater willingness in the community to become involved in other issues and projects, Fèis Eige noted that ‘project management successfully undertaken gave the community and organisers self confidence’, and linked with a realisation for the need for better development of cultural tourism and the necessary superstructure such as hostel and bunkhouses. In general there was ‘confidence that more can be done in the future, especially by linking with other similar organisations’.

In some cases, the fèis was felt to ‘provide a strand of education in the arts that the formal education system has failed to deliver’ (Fèis Tir an Ùrma), there was a ‘definite trend from young parents locally of regained pride in language and culture’ (Fèis Bharraigh). This was echoed by Fèis Òighridh Ìle who believed that ‘Gaelic speaking areas must not be seen as living museums, rather we have a greater understanding of the need to put effort in to provide our local entertainment’.

In terms of a general wish list, the representative from Lewis put a heartfelt plea for ‘a part-time co-ordinator, of tidy methodical habits, and analytical mind and access to a computer, word processor and fax…’. I’m sure these are sentiments that would still continue to be shared today in the expanded activities that a more organised fèis movement undertakes. While my research dealt with the fèisean as part of a larger study of the overall impact of Gaelic arts and culture, it was clear even at that early stage that as well as an appreciable economic impact, the overall effect of the fèisean movement was turning out to be much deeper and greater than might have been imagined by those who set the ball rolling in Barra in 1981.
KATE MARTIN: Lecturer in Community Education, University of Dundee

Over the years, research on the féisean has played an important part in helping to raise awareness about the movement. This section gives a brief overview of some key studies on the féisean over the past twenty-five years, and highlights some suggested benefits.

The 1982 HIDB report, Cor na Gàidhlig was first to recognise the importance of the féis model, noting that Fèis Bharraigh was a strong example of grass-roots community enterprise. To support the féis idea, the report recommended a creative and mobile bank of resources, materials, instruments and teaching techniques and skills, noting that other communities must desire such a féis for themselves and create it out of their own communal enthusiasm.

Dr Finlay MacLeod’s 1986 report The Gaelic Arts: A Way Ahead saw the féis as a flagship for Gaelic arts…among those bodies who have promoted the Gaelic arts in recent year…none has caught the public imagination and attention of the media more than Fèis Bharraigh. This report noted the wealth of arts skills dormant in local communities and first made the distinction between a ‘performance-based’ or ‘tuition’ féis, citing Fèis Bharraigh and the newly-formed Fèis Rois as examples of the latter.

The 1991 HIDB/SAC report The Economic and Social Impact of the Arts in the Highlands and Islands, carried out by Mackay Consultants and writer Tom McGrath, was commissioned as part of the HI Light Year of the Arts to establish what roles the arts, including the féisean, might play in economic, social and cultural life in the Highlands and Islands. The study found that attendance at exhibitions and events by visitors to the area generated £1.34 million, and that there were 700-800 full-time equivalent jobs in the arts. In terms of volunteers, the report estimated membership of arts organisations to be 15,000; that approximately 1,200 volunteers supported the arts in any given week, and over the year 3,750 people would promote or host events. Not only was the organisation of arts events dependant on volunteers, the report noted, but there was also a huge hidden subsidy in local support to arts initiatives.

Social benefits of the arts were identified by this report as retention or attraction of artists and their families, and people who are active in the community; transmission of values and standards; raising consciousness of community identity; raising morale; encouraging interaction between communities and establishing self-confidence transferable to other initiatives. The report concluded that by building on current progress, the arts could help to create a new identity in the Highlands and Islands. Tom McGrath noted that…If you don’t know what a féis is, you haven’t lived. You might think it’s a traditional music festival, and to an extent you would be right, but in the Gaelic world it is more than that, it’s a social and cultural force of extraordinary significance.

The Mackay report included the féisean as one of ten case studies considered to models of good practice in the Highlands and Islands. This helped to raise a national awareness of the work of the féisean, and fed into the consultative process being carried out by the Scottish Arts Council in their 1993 Charter for the Arts in Scotland. This national strategy recognised that there was a renaissance in Scottish traditional music, quoting Aly Bain’s observation that there was more interest in traditional music now than at any time for 50 years. For the Arts Council, recognising this powerful demand for a change in attitude towards Scotland’s indigenous cultures meant rethinking definitions and boundaries of the arts.

Meanwhile in Arts and Education: Perceptions of Policy, Provision and Practice, the féisean were recognised as part of a cultural revival stemming from the HIDB’s economic initiatives. This 1992 Scottish Arts Council study noted that in particular the féis movement had prospered, offering traditional skills in declining or lost musical and oral arts to young people, and prompted by the absence or inadequacy of such support from formal education.

During the same period, Dr Frank Rennie wrote Feis Bharraigh as a case study on rural and community development. This report noted some impacts of the féis in Barra as a modest creation of jobs, improvement to local skills, an increase in general confidence and benefits in the tourism sector. The study quoted féis organisers as saying…if it wasn’t for the HIDB we couldn’t have gone on…Fèis Bharraigh would have been dead long ago if the HIDB hadn’t helped us. There were a lot of people who really, really believed in the féisean…If you didn’t you would have given up long ago.

The féisean featured in several Scottish Arts Council studies in the mid nineties: Now to Create: Arts and Education in Partnership (1994) and Changing Rural Lives: The arts in Scotland’s rural areas (1995). The 1994 study recommended closer partnerships between professional arts practitioners and schools, citing Fèis nan Gàidheal as one of nine national case studies of good practice in work with young people. Changing Rural Lives selected Fèis Rois as one of nine case studies, noting that the féís increased social capital…the year round féis has given young people from different parts of the area an unprecedented opportunity to work together towards a common aim, and numerous friendships have been forged as a result.

Not only are the traditional arts being learned and developed, but tomorrow’s adult community is working together today. The study noted that Fèis Rois was described by BBC Scotland as the jewel in the crown of the féis movement, and suggested that participation in the arts
enhanced a sense of community, collective identity and increased self-confidence.

In 1996, cultural policy researchers Comedia published Northern Lights: The Social Impact of the Fèisean as part of a wider European study of the social purpose and value of participatory arts programmes, focusing on themes of community development, empowerment, social cohesion and identity. François Matarasso, researcher and author of the study, was enthusiastic about the Fèisean. Rarely have I seen work whose quality and value spoke so eloquently for itself as that which I witnessed in Scotland… I know how far it is from the committee room to the ceilidh, and I would urge all who want a more rounded understanding of the Fèisean to see, to hear and to participate whenever the opportunity should arise.

Drawing from views provided by 250 Feis participants, Matarasso concluded that in terms of community development, the Fèisean make a hugely valuable contribution to their communities at very little public expense, citing as an example that in 1996, the Fèisean provided a considerable amount of year round activity for less than half the public subsidy allocated, without hesitation, to a single swimming pool and sports hall in Ullapool.

Matarasso suggested three essential characteristics of the Fèisean: the central role of community, the importance of Gaelic and the high level of artistic quality. According to Matarasso, the Fèisean contribute to individual and personal development, social cohesion, community empowerment and self-determination, local image and identity, imagination and vision, and health well-being. In the longer term, Matarasso recognised three distinct areas of need: support for volunteers, stable long-term funding and respect for the work carried out by the Fèisean. A unique feature noted about the Fèisean was the opportunity to learn in an enjoyable setting, without pressure of competitions or specific targets. As one participant explained the Mod is an ending, everything leads up to that moment. The Feis is a beginning, an opportunity from which everything is possible. It’s the starting point.

The Comedia report recognised that the Fèisean involve community action aimed at strengthening indigenous culture, which was not just about promoting the arts as an end in themselves, but about reinforcing underpinning beliefs, values and relationships intrinsic to the Gaelic traditions. In working towards shared goals, benefits of personal and collective development were achieved, with the development of skills which could be transferred to other projects. An example given of the contribution of the Fèisean to community capacity building was Cothrom in South Uist. Main MacInnes, original driving force behind Feis Tir a’ Mhuraan, went on to establish Cothrom, a women’s training organisation in South Uist, securing a building… and winning a £250,000 EU grant to run courses in computer skills, tailoring and child care… she says unequivocally that ‘Cothrom came out of the confidence I had learned through the feis’.

Although the Comedia report suggests that the idea might be difficult to replicate, the Feis model has inspired other projects, notably the Doric Gordon Gaitherin in Aberdeenshire and the Edinburgh Youth Gaitherin, part of the Adult Learning Project. Similar projects exist in Shetland and Northumberland, where local traditions, dialect and local music form the basis of tuition.

Concern about replication may stem from a view that the Fèisean had developed without professional involvement… inspired by the example of other communities… people with little or no experience of arts work or community action have taken up the challenge of establishing a feis. In fact, a wealth of professional skills has been pooled in the creation and support of the Fèisean. Eight Fèisean were initiated by Community Education workers, and teachers, arts workers and other professionals have been involved in most Fèisean. It may be that this collaboration between communities, community organisations, educators and professional musicians is essential to the success of the movement.

According to the EKOS report commissioned by Highlands and Islands Enterprise in 2001: The original vision of a community-led festival that passed on the skills of traditional music, song and dance has developed into a highly effective network of volunteers, tutors and supporting organisations with centres of activity across most parts of Scotland where there are active Gaelic communities. The study echoed many of Comedia’s findings, citing the key characteristics of the Fèisean as community, culture and economy, volunteers, participation of children, the key role of women, cultural identity and the role of Gaelic. The report is strong on the need to support volunteers; the Fèisean movement has developed into the formidable network that it is today because of the continued and committed work of the local volunteers.

Beattie and Westbrook’s 2004 report on The Social and Economic Impact of the Arts in the Western Isles indicated that the arts generate 430 full-time equivalent jobs and £4.7 million in the area each year. The Western Isles Fèisean were grouped together as one of six case studies… all of which are successful community arts initiatives that are excellent examples, acknowledged nationally of what can be achieved with sustained and committed effort. Social benefits were indicated as enhanced community identity, use of Gaelic, health and wellbeing, social interaction in and between communities and population retention.

To sum up: in 2006, it seems that in return for a relatively small investment, in the Highlands and Islands and beyond, the Fèisean are producing a generation of assertive and skilled young people who are confident in their own culture and as a result can relate to other cultures. They are creating networks, enhancing the quality of life, building social capital and community capacity, and contributing to employment in rural communities.

When young people become aware of and confident about their own culture, it becomes possible for them to appreciate other cultures, and contribute to a wider social participation and understanding, as Donnie Munro, former Runrig member notes:

As the global village becomes an ever-increasing reality, far from seeking to build global uniformity, it has become clear throughout international society that what we must have to offer each other is in fact our cultural diversity. It is what creates interest in the world, it is what adds colour to our identity and it is what strengthens the rich tapestry of international culture. (Northerings, 2003)
The feis movement has done more to revitalise Gaelic society than a hundred civil service studies

Michael Russell

So what might the next twenty-five years hold for the feisean? Views and ideas are always needed to move something forward, but so is a willingness to help to turn ideas into reality. These are exciting times for the feisean, more than ever before there is potential to develop levels of tuition, perhaps forging links with formal education. With the support of fieldworkers, new feisean might emerge in other communities.

This chapter involves some of the ideas expressed by feis organisers, tutors and participants on the future for the feisean. David Smillie, HIE’s Head of Culture and Community; Bryan Beattie, chair of Feis Rois; Duncan MacLeod and John MacDonald, who formerly chaired Feisean nan Gàidheal; and John Joe MacNeil of Feis Bharraigh give their views on the future for the feisean.

Scots singer Sheena Wellington begins this final chapter. A tutor at Feis ‘sa Mheadhain and long-term supporter of the feis movement, Sheena gives her views on the feisean. Sheena has served as a member of the Cultural Commission which produced the 2005 report ‘Our Next Major Enterprise’.
SHEENA WELLINGTON:  
Scots singer and Member of the Cultural Commission  

Sheena Wellington is a celebrated Scots singer, broadcaster and teacher and was the first traditional musician to serve on the Scottish Arts Council's Music Committee. Campaigning as a 'passionate and articulate advocate for traditional music', Sheena worked with Fife Council as Traditional Arts Development Officer; was granted honorary life membership of the Traditional Music and Song Association of Scotland (TMSA) and received the 1997 Heritage Society annual award for her outstanding contribution to Scotland's cultural life. In 1999, Sheena sang 'A Man's a Man' at the opening of the Scottish Parliament.

It's so great to realise that the fèis movement is twenty five years old. When you consider how much it does, it's quite remarkable. I first heard of the fèisean at the St Andrews Folk festival, from someone who'd come across it in the Western Isles. Then I heard about it from John Murphy in the Arts Council; he was quite keen that the TMSA might look at that model. But the TMSA was developing along different lines and although there are some teaching aspects of the TMSA, it has never quite developed on the same scale as the Gaelic fèisean. In the Arts Council there was a regime change around the early nineties, with the appointment of Matthew Rooke as Music Officer, and he constituted a group to look at traditional music. One of the first things we did was go up to a Fèis nan Gaidheall AGM in Bonar Bridge, and I was absolutely thrilled to bits about this. I found out a lot more about it and felt that there was this tremendous commitment and energy about these initiatives and thought this movement needs to be supported.

Around then I was appointed to the Music Committee of the Scottish Arts Council, which was a first for them. £50.000 was put aside for traditional music, for the whole of Scotland, for a year – which was £50.000 more than we'd had before – it was divided up and £10,000 was put aside for the fèisean. So I went to a couple of fèisean to see what was going on. I have a memory to this day of being in Ullapool for the fèis in 1992 and meeting all these wonderful kids, it was a glorious day. It was two days before the general election that year, and the sun was shining, all the kids were playing music and singing outside in the playing field and I walked from group to group, they were singing Gaelic songs, playing music, doing drama. I drove back down the road thinking 'tomorrow is the dawn of a new Scotland.' I'm sure you remember, of course, the election came and went, and we were all left thinking 'how did that happen?' but the memory of the kids that day has stayed with me, just the sheer joy of it all.

To me, the fèis movement has been the catalyst, the pace setter and the inspiration for so much else that has happened. The scene in Scotland in traditional music for the past fifty years has been entirely transformed – although we're still not getting enough funding. (I'll probably be lying on my death bed saying 'we're still not getting enough money for Scottish music!'). But the scene has been transformed, and I think the fèis movement has an awful lot to do with that, because it has come from the community. I think all great movements come from the people, and sometimes you need a way to give that a voice. I think that's what's great about the fèis movement, and the fact that it's has managed to use this energy and transform it into other things, political things. The fèis movement has been the bedrock on which the progress and the profile of Gaelic has been lifted. Now it's coming up for two generations; the first fèis kids are now sending their own children to the fèis. Looking back twenty-five years, from the first group of ten year olds who have their own kids now, the fèisean have given two generations of children in the Gaidhealtachd, and other parts of Scotland too, the belief in their own culture; the belief in the fact that it's important in its own right. The language holds our history, songs, stories and music culture. The fèisean have given people that belief in the importance of their own culture. It's not something that's dead and gone, forgotten, and old fashioned; it's something that is living and vital and deserves to live entirely for itself. A language – every language – holds its own unique culture; every language is part of the heritage of all humanity.

The reason that I believe so strongly in supporting Scots and all its wonderful and infinite varieties, and also support Gaelic and its wonderful varieties, is that these are particular aspects of humanity's culture that we hold in trust. It's for us, it's our responsibility to cherish and look after them, and that's true whether we speak them or not. I think that's a very important point. I feel as moved by a Gaelic song as I do by a song from the Glens of Angus. To me, it's all part of being Scottish.

I have a Gaelic first name and used to be annoyed that it wasn't spelt 'Sìne'; the Gaelic spelling; I thought it would be more distinguished that way! Except people would be calling you 'sine' instead of 'Sheen'; in Scots of course 'sine' has a completely different meaning. I mean, it means to rinse, as in 'sine oot that bottle!' If we throw away language, hundreds of stories, thousands of songs would be lost. In Thurso recently, in the Northlands Festival, I heard an Inuit singer, singing in a language which is only understood by 300 other people in a small part of Greenland. Language is vital. Apart from anything else, it adds to the whole galumfre of what we've got in Scotland to offer the world. At the Smithsonian Folk Life Festival in America recently, the signage for Scotland was to be in three languages, Scots, Gaelic and English; except that there was a suggestion that we 'shouldn't confuse the Americans by suggesting that the Scots couldn't speak English'. We felt that Americans coming to Scotland might be interested to hear something different, something unique to Scotland.

I don't see any great reason why the fèisean shouldn't develop initiatives for tourists, if that's what they want to do. Visitors do love it, and participants seem to enjoy it immensely too. I'm concerned about having 'aural wallpaper' wrapped around the place, but...
that’s not what the féisean offer. It may not suit all the féisean, but I have seen the success of the Féis Rois Ceilidh Trail, and I was aware of the veterans of that initiative setting up their own tour, and presenting a very well worked out itinerary and budget and applying for money for ‘the van.’ The structure of Féis Rois is not entirely typical of most féisean in that it’s not predominantly voluntary, but I’ve seen other féisean where young people are coming through and coming back to teach in the féis, and also have an interest in the business side of things, for example how to organise concerts. I think that should be encouraged and finance should be found for that, too, because it is important. As far as tourism is concerned, tourists are not stupid. You know yourself when you go abroad and you get the Spanish Flamenco dancer who may or may not be genuine. We were on a trip to Turkey recently where the supposedly indigenous belly dancer was actually from the Ukraine. The whirling dervish was very good though, she was quite authentic. We do have quite a sophisticated market appeal to visitors, and that’s true if they come here for golf or for the castles or if they’re looking for their heritage. These people do recognise the genuine article, and I think it’s important that more and more of our kids are confident to go out and play the genuine article.

I’m involved in the new Fest o’ the Mids, in Stirling. Because of where it is, it will offer Gaelic and Scots and Gaelic song. It’s possibly one of the ways forward for parts of Scotland which are not predominantly Gaelic speaking. It takes place over a weekend and it has some first-rate tutors – it’s an interesting development and can be done without diluting either Scots or Gaelic. Ishbel MacAskill and I have been teaching Gaelic and Scots song together for years, at the L’Orient Celtic Festival for example. There’s still folk in Catalonia that think ‘the Dandy, the Beano and the Sunday Post’ is a waulking song. The Gaitherin’ in Aberdeenshire has the format of the féis but is based around Doric which is great; as is the Adult Learning Project (ALP) in Edinburgh which is based on Scots. I think the format of the féis is an excellent one and is one that could be used anywhere. It’s been picked up in European countries; Sardinia is one I believe, who are beginning to use the same model. Some of that came from the 1996 Comedia report, ‘Use or Ornament’ which looked at Féis nan Gàidheal as a major case study. The model is known about in many places. It is an excellent model of community co-operation, community arts, community culture, it’s the way it should be; that the community is teaching its children and that should be the first cultural input they have – their own culture. If I had my way, there would be Scots and Gaelic singers and story-tellers in every nursery school in the country. You start music with song. Song is the one art form that you can take with you wherever you are. I think it should be started in nursery; singing should be part of the curriculum, it should be a continual part, and a daily part. It’s a fabulous way to learn, it actually builds capacity to do other things, and it’s a hugely important tool for developing learning.

I still don’t think we’ve got the message across how useful a tool Scots and Gaelic are in education. I believe that it should be possible in Scotland to go through your education in the medium of Gaelic. The féisean have also raised awareness about Gaelic education, and I believe that Gaelic medium education should be available for any parent in the Highlands and Islands who wants their child to learn through Gaelic, and that Gaelic education should be available to any child in Scotland, certainly in secondary school. There are a lot of minority languages in Europe, they’re all important, and in spite of efforts to stamp them out over hundreds of years, they’ve survived.

In the arts in Scotland, we are forever getting strategies, reports, plans and we’re no further forward. The Cultural Commission reported in 2005, and I hope that something will come out of that, although it won’t be in place ‘till 2007. We need to get away from the idea that some art forms are innately superior. No, they are not! Looking back at what the traditional music working group did, it seems small compared with what we’re doing now, but it was all incremental steps, now that we have proved through the féis movement, through ALP, that there is still a tremendous amount of vitality within the tradition. When you look at Scotland’s music scene today, some of the most exciting, innovative music and cross-cultural projects are actually being fuelled by traditional musicians.
lullabies, in work songs, singing around the house, for me that’s a main route for transmission of songs through the generations rather than through more formal gatherings.

The Irish model, the Comhaltas, is competitive; what I like about the fèisean is that they’re not competitive. However I do think the performance element is good; it’s important for children to show what they’ve learned at the end of the week, in an atmosphere where they’re all together. It’s about team work; they get the chance for people come to come and hear what they’ve learned and say ‘well done’. Learning music is not just for the sake of learning music; it’s for your own enjoyment and the enjoyment of those around you. There are few things in life that give you a greater kick than the applause of an audience – speaking as someone who goes into a song and dance routine at the opening of a fridge door!

...what I like about the fèisean is that they’re not competitive.
DAVID SMILLIE:
Head of Community, Culture & Heritage, Highlands and Islands Enterprise

Gaelic culture is more than just a language. The accusation often levelled at Welsh language activists is that Wales lacks a distinct culture and only language distinguishes the Welsh from the English. I don't personally subscribe to this view, but in Scotland the waters are less muddy and we have a strong and distinctive Gaelic musical culture which needs to be promoted in its linguistic context.

Gaelic culture is sometimes said to be backward looking, inward looking and passive. In terms of Gaelic development, we need to find ways to counteract this view in order to make the culture attractive to the young people who are the future of the language. The music scene is active and innovative here, so we are not simply producing musicians who are trained to turn out classic traditional compositions to a strict formula, although that has its place. There is recognition that our music is dynamic and that forms can be reinterpreted freely, which I believe is attractive to young people.

Why should we support Gaelic? This is one of the fundamental questions. Gaelic is unique to Scotland and the UK. In a Scottish context it is one of the important components of identity, and therefore important to many Scots whether they speak it or not. The countervailing views are usually associated with arguments about waste of public money and creation of a unified British identity, but I suspect that the vast majority of Scots, and probably a good many English and Welsh people, actively want Gaelic to continue to exist. That needs money, since historically the Scottish and British states have actively tried to suppress the language. Times have changed and so have people's attitudes.

There are many other ways of supporting Gaelic language and culture. Writing, publishing and bookselling, as well as libraries and the Internet, are vital areas for attention. Education is fundamental, since many Gaels cannot adequately read or write their own language, and learners sometimes find the written language easier than the spoken language. Social situations, where a dispersed population can actually use the language to speak to each other are important areas for attention – through the debate of ordinary folk a culture finds its place in the world. Drama accentuates, interprets and sometimes helps to resolve the dilemmas that people face. Therefore, there are lots of ways we can help Gaelic culture.

Should feisean develop cultural tourism initiatives? Definitely. We are beginning to look at this again in the Highlands and Islands following comments from the National Geographic magazine about lack of cultural content in the tourism experience here – the Highlands and Islands emerged as one of the world's top ten 'wilderness' experiences. Resulting from this, VisitScotland might now give cultural tourism a higher profile.

In general we have to be more proactive for the language; language forms the backbone of music that determines the rhythm of music, it's fundamental. If it goes, the rhythm will disappear; it can't be maintained.

Kenna Campbell, Gaelic Singer
JOHN MACDONALD:
Former Chair of Fèisean nan Gàidheal

The main issues that still need to be addressed are probably funding and Gaelic. Some fèisean struggle financially and there must be ways to help them onto a sure footing. Fèisean nan Gàidheal has been working on Gaelic language policy consistently, and has asked each fèis to set up a development plan about how they’re going to promote the language. A lot of people may have come to the fèisean with a musical interest, and saw it as a bit of an inconvenience to have to think about Gaelic, perhaps in some areas where the language isn’t so strong. So having a development plan ensures that the language always has a central focus.

I think overall the fèis movement has benefited Scotland. A tremendous number of young people now play musical instruments and play traditional music – I don’t know if it would be so prolific if it was left up to individual communities to support that activity. I think Fèisean nan Gàidheal has given the whole thing a place in modern day Scotland. It has helped to present an argument to establish the traditional music course at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, and the Piping degree. A lot of young people may have developed careers in traditional music, having come through the fèis movement.

Having studied for a degree, some may go on to be employed as teachers or tutors in Gaelic or traditional music. It’s hard work, and it may involve long hours and may involve other supplementary work, but it must be one of the best, most satisfying things to make your career out of something you are passionate about. It’s satisfying to see young people go through the fèis movement and become very proficient, then impart their skills to an up and coming generation. The fèis movement is well known throughout Scotland; it’s highlighted in many arenas as an example of good practice, and is of European interest too. Traditional music is strongest where there are fèisean; in other areas there may be young people playing but perhaps not in the same numbers. I think it’s led to a much more healthy awareness about traditional music and the role it plays – it has helped to support other aspects of traditional culture and has enriched our cultural life.

I would like to see the links with the communities strengthened. The Arts Council seems to have woken up to traditional music and is appointing musicians in schools and so on. I wouldn’t like to see all the provision based in schools; it might lose the richness that comes from link with local communities; I would like to see this maintained and expanded, so that there would be more young people involved in playing instruments and participating in cultural activities with more emphasis on music and sport, those kind of career pursuits. As a model developed in the 20th century that has links into the 21st century, the fèisean will probably change in the future, but it’s been very healthy; it’s been very positive seeing the revival in traditional music. The whole industry has developed around it. In the mid-70s apparently there were two Gaelic music LPs produced annually; now there are more than two produced every month; so there’s a lot of choice for people to listen to, and hopefully for people to earn money from.

CHRISTINE MARTIN:
Strings teacher Isle of Skye

There should be more money from the main organisation to enable more classes to be tutored in Gaelic where a large proportion of the pupils have the language, as there are more Gaelic speaking tutors available now. More liaison with teachers and local tutors is needed, to maximise the benefit to the young people taking part, so that pupils can be placed in the appropriate class for their level. Also, music should be given out at the end of each fèis, just as a reminder for the pupil or to enable continued learning of the music with a regular teacher. For progress, tuition needs to be week-in week-out. The fèis is a great way to spend a week using and developing skills learned during regular lessons.

Perhaps we need a new generation of well-trained multi-instrumentalist music teachers who can offer wider instrumental opportunities to pupils in school as one visiting member of staff rather than several. Many of the new graduates from the RSAMD, Strathclyde and other music courses would be interested in training for these posts if the Scottish Parliament were to put up the funding for permanent employment to really carry through their ‘Culture for all’ programmes. It would also provide permanent well-paid jobs for our young musicians. In secondary schools we need class music teachers who have a broader spectrum of experience and interest, like in Denmark, where teachers are expected to cover a range of styles encompassing traditional, classical and jazz and it is part of their training and knowledge. Otherwise, there’s a danger of ruling out interesting genres of music that are broadening to young people. If you look at something like Sgathach, the first Gaelic opera, that was a really innovative initiative and very successful. We need to be open to more possibilities like that.

I think there needs to be more jobs for well-trained young people in the fèisean, for example as organisers, organising summer tours and helping with administration of local fèisean. There comes a point where it’s about more than just volunteering and it’s worth making it a job. I think it’s great having local support through community involvement, but I don’t think you can expect people working as volunteers to administer extra classes, or plan trips, it’s too much work.

In order to develop something, money has to be made available for training and employing people to run it successfully.
BRYAN BEATTIE:  
Chair, Fèis Rois

I don’t think the job is done yet by any manner of means. But in a comparatively short amount of time the movement has had a more significant influence on traditional music generally in terms of cultural policy in ways that will affect a genuine change in Scotland than either could have been foreseen, when the pioneers like Kate, Christine and Father Colin in Barra were involved. One of the good things is that it regenerates itself; it has created a lot of opportunities for people that have come through the fèisean. Many have gone on to have professional careers in music, either as teachers, as players, or both. That kind of recycling of talent, inspiring talent, is not done in a narrow way as the fèisean don’t always just use their own, but they work alongside others, which I think is a remarkably healthy method of regeneration. It involves a mentoring, for experienced players to instill in the people they teach a genuine love and passion for music that they want to pass on. My own engagement in the fèis movement has been recycled, in that I was involved in an administrative sense and have now come back onto the Board of Fèis Rois.

For the future I think it needs to put on a sustainable footing. Anything that runs on voluntary effort has the risk that whenever the good volunteers go, an organisation can collapse. I think that’s happened less with the fèisean than it has with other voluntary arts organisations, I’m not sure why – maybe there’s a breadth of feeling about it in the community that a fèis emerges from. I think it’s broader than just music, I think there is a genuine social, cultural strength of feeling, almost in the way people have an affinity to their local primary school or library. It somehow is ‘of them’, that is a tremendous strength, that is the ‘Holy Grail’ of any community movement. But it does need a bit of oil to keep it going, from local authorities or whatever, to give it funding to keep going. So sustainability, that’s the main thing that’s needed.

The other thing I would like to see us do is to develop stronger links with formal education, in influencing the music curriculum. It’s beginning to happen with the Youth Music Initiative, to do work in schools, not only in the Highlands but in other parts of Scotland too. Over the last eighteen months there’s been an opportunity to do some pioneering work in schools, and I think ‘why do kids want to spend a week of their holidays going back into school to do music?’ There’s something about the approach to music education that the fèis has that I think could it could very usefully impart to the education curriculum. Fèis Rois with its size and experience has the capacity to do this. The position of the Gaelic language is greater in some fèisean than others, and reflects the community that it comes from.

The Gaelic element in Fèis Rois may not be as strong as in other fèisean, but then neither is the level of Gaelic within the community. Gaelic is enough to whet the appetite of the non-Gaelic speakers and promote an interest in Gaelic and a desire to pursue it further. If the fèis was run entirely in the medium of Gaelic, or at least 50%, it would defeat the purpose and might not bring so many people in. Learning Gaelic may not have been the core reason for getting involved in a fèis, but it has been an added extra for some.

The Chair of the Scottish Arts Council, Richard Holloway, visited Venezuela to look at...
It’s the approach that’s the thing. That empowerment, enabling, involvement, all these buzzwords.

maybe in urban areas, where perhaps a different art form might have a similar resonance. It’s the approach that’s the thing, that empowerment, enabling, involvement, all these buzzwords.

IAIN IOSAPH MACNELL:
Feis Bharraigh

Tha tòrr mòr ri dhèanamh. Cuimhnich gur e fèis a th’ ann agus cha chanaimn gum bu chóir dhùinn am format a chall. Rud a chanainn, gu bheil e duilich nach urrainn dhan fhèis a bhith ann airson dà sheachdain. B’ e call mòr, mòr a bh’ ann nuair a chaoidh an fhèis sìos gu aon seachdadh. Chan atharraichinn gu brath e ach chum sinn Feis Bharraigh a’ rith airson dà seachdadh, airson nan celebrations. Feumaidh mi a radh gun robh a’ chlann air fad ag ràdh gum d’ fhuaireadh airson a mach às, seach na fhuaireadh airson aon seachdadh.

Sin mar a tha cuimhn’ agam fein air a bhith a’ dol ann – airson dà sheachdadh. A’ chiad seachdadh bhiodh sinn a’ dearnach tòrr mòr ciúil, bhiodh sinn a’ cluich deich pìosan ciúil ‘s an uair sin airson airson na seachdadh eile bhiodh sinn a’ dearnach rudeigin eile agus bha sinn ag ionnsachadh tòrr.

Chan ainmn an aon rud eile a bu chóir dhùinn a bhith a’ coimhead air ‘s e sin gum bi classicaichean a’ rith faid na bliadhna agus gum bu chóir do chuideigin bho Feisean na Gàidheal a bhith a’ coimhead ri sin.

Tha mi a’ smaoineachadh gum feum sinn tilleadh air ais gu toiseach bathachd agus smaoi-tinn air de an rud a bh’ ann agus de an rud a bh’ ann. Agus a bheil sinn a’ dol sìos an rathad a’-nis far a bheil sinn a’ call sin agus gu bheil an fhèis a’ fàs coltach ri classy wine bar, tuilleadh is sophisticated gun ghuth air na seann làithean? Feumaidh sinn a bhith faicheadach nach eil sinn a’ dol a dhol sìos rathadh nach bu cóir dhùinn. Ais deidh còig bliadhna fichead, bu
There are more opportunities for young musicians than ever before, because of the fèisean.

Worker, working in their own area or fèisean are growing so much that there’s much more work to be done to give the fèisean more space. Because of the fèisean there are more and more people who are growing in professional skills. More and more people are choosing to go into the fèisean for their careers and encouraging some to go on and some to come back and work in the fèisean. It’s really quite hard to imagine what life would be like without it. It’s a huge gap in terms of the music and Gaelic industry. There are many different elements of work within the music and Gaelic industry, and are more youngsters from the fèisean going into different aspects of work, for example, being a sound technician, because there aren’t that many good sound technicians who are used to working with traditional music. I see kids on the Ceilidh Trail working the mixing desk and they love it, and I would love to see more following the route of working with sound. There’s other elements, like management work and agency work, and we need more of that to bolster the industry. I think we should take responsibility as an organisation that has access to thousands of youngsters and can influence their careers. I think we should be using that to bolster the industry. I think we should take responsibility as an organisation that has access to thousands of youngsters and can influence their careers. I think we should be using that.

John Joe MacNeil:
Feis Bharraigh
(English summary)

There’s much more work to be done to give the Feisiean more direction. I would say that the fèisean are growing so much that each fèis needs its own support worker, working in their own area or island. I think that some fèisean could do with more professional input; there’s often not enough time for voluntary committees to work on the development of the fèis. A paid co-ordinator could take over some of that work.

I think there needs to be some kind of company set up in a similar way to Fèisean nan Gàidheal, which organises collection and production of music, Gaelic songs, poetry and stories. The fèisean don’t do this yet to any great extent. I would say that if we don’t have this, the stories and the poems will disappear with the old folks that keep them alive — this is something the fèisean could look at. There is much to do, in terms of language. It’s sad that there are so many of my age that are losing the Gaelic because they don’t use it often enough. I hope that there will be an encouragement of the use of Gaelic.

We should go back to the start and ask ourselves what the fèis is all about. We have to be careful not to take the wrong route. We should ask ourselves after 25 years, why has it been so successful? And we should ensure that the next 25 years enjoys the same success.

Duncan MacLeod:
First chair of Fèisean nan Gàidheal
(English summary)

One of the challenges is to ensure that the work of Fèisean nan Gàidheal is spread throughout the year, rather than being concentrated in the one-week or two-week period of the individual fèisean. The Gaelic community is changing and Fèisean nan Gàidheal should be aware that it is one of the forces in shaping the new Gaelic community. As part of that they should make sure that music, music tuition and making music retains its place within this community. This will cost money but I am sure that the money would be found if Fèisean nan Gàidheal can work out an appropriate strategy to meet this challenge.

Nicola Marshall:
Highland Development Officer, Fèisean nan Gàidheal

I would like to think in the future that local Fèisean would be able to work without having to say, ‘Oh we can’t do this, where can we get money from?’ We can’t do this without support. It’s got to be about core funding. I think the fèisean have a huge significance across the country. They’re providing work; they’re producing musicians, dancers, singers and although it’s taken quite a long time, its work still may not be recognised. I think if you took away the fèisean there would be a huge gap in terms of Gaelic and development of Gaelic. Certainly for me, there are more and more people who have been influenced by the fèisean in their choice of career. You grow up with it; if you’ve been going to different fèisean for sixteen years, first the junior fèis and then the senior fèis, it’s quite a long time, its work still may not be recognised. I think if you took away the fèisean there would be a huge gap in terms of Gaelic and development of Gaelic. Certainly for me, there are more and more people who have been influenced by the fèisean in their choice of career. You grow up with it; if you’ve been going to different fèisean for sixteen years, first the junior fèis and then the senior fèis, it’s quite a long time, its work still may not be recognised.

Ingrid Henderson:
Fèisean Development Officer, Lochaber

What I would like to see, now that there are many different elements of work within the music and Gaelic industry, is more youngsters from the fèisean going into different aspects of work, for example, being a sound technician, because there aren’t that many good sound technicians who are used to working with traditional music. I see kids on the Ceilidh Trail working the mixing desk and they love it, and I would love to see more following the route of working with sound. There’s other elements, like management work and agency work, and we need more of that to bolster the industry. I think we should take responsibility as an organisation that has access to thousands of youngsters and can influence their careers. I think we should be using that and encouraging some to go on to business skills courses and then coming back and work in the music or Gaelic industries.

I think if it’s appropriate to new communities, and their particular situation, then by all means we should develop new fèisean. But what has to be key is still the ethos of
trying to protect something worthwhile in your community, and making it community-based. Rather than develop just for the sake of developing, I think what needs to happen is supporting what’s already there, because in most areas it’s working really well. I don’t think I’ve developed anything that people haven’t asked for. It has to be community-led, and as long as the powers-that-be understand that, and continue to understand the importance of that, I think that will make all the difference.

EACHANN MACNEILL:
Feis an Eilein (Eilean na Nollaig), Cape Breton
– quote from Thar Chuan is Chaolas.
‘In 15 years time, I would like there to be young Gaelic speakers who would run the feis, and more Gaelic in the community. There won’t be an all-Gaelic feis, but there will be more Gaelic, which is the main thing. Everything else, the dance, music and so on, would go with the language. If the language survives everything follows from that. If people here want Gaelic to survive it will. If they don’t, it won’t. It’s up to us now, whether or not we’re involved in Gaelic.’

WILMA KENNEDY:
Gaelic singer and tutor
There has been a recognition of the worth of traditional music, not just in the Gaelic side and the feis movement, but nationally, a recognition that it is of as much value, as much importance musically as the classical genres. People have realised there have to be places of excellence, where young people are able to go and can take their musical prowess to the highest level possible, so that they are in a place where they are given as much support and inspiration as they need, and then you have fantastic students coming out of Plockton and other courses who go on to take over the world.

We’ve fed a generation of young people a fantastic knowledge, that they can either then just take on board and enjoy it and it becomes part of their lives forever more or they are people who are very skilled and take it to the highest level. But if you’ve inspired a nation of kids just to enjoy music, to appreciate pipe music, Gaelic songs, you’re changing the way people think, what they enjoy.

When it comes to the Gaelic language, what matters is to promote a positive attitude, so that people can see the importance of the language. A lot of people come to a language through music; they’re first of all interested in the music and then they realise that they don’t quite understand everything about the music because they don’t have the language, so they come to the language, and that’s them, they’re hooked. To understand a song, you must understand what you’re singing about. For example, to communicate mouth music, you have to understand the complexity of the rhythm of the syllables that give it that lift. You want to share that with kids, and share the importance of having the language – so that they want to learn. You can’t make a child learn, but you can interest them so much that they really, really want to know, and that is when they will take in the information, because they’re desperate to learn.

There are different reasons why some feisean have more Gaelic than others, perhaps because there isn’t a strong Gaelic community, or because the committee support Gaelic but don’t all speak it, or perhaps have struggled to find Gaelic speaking tutors. Some feisean have moved forward greatly on that, but it can’t be a tokenistic thing. Gaelic has to be seen as a vital, necessary, integrated part of a feis – if it wasn’t for the language we wouldn’t be here in the first place. Without the language you don’t have a feis, that’s what it’s all about.
References


1. Magnus Graham and fellow participant, Feis an Earraigh.
2. Feis Rois Fèisteas Drama Festival, run in association with Clan Donald.
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# Glossary of Gaelic Words

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<th>Translation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Alba</td>
<td>Scotland</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blas</td>
<td>taste; also a pan-Highland music and cultural festival</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bocsa</td>
<td>accordion, button-box or melodeon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ceòl</td>
<td>music</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clann</td>
<td>children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clàrsach</td>
<td>small Scottish harp</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coimhearsnachd</td>
<td>community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Còmhlan-Ciùil</td>
<td>music group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Còmhlan-pòba</td>
<td>pipe band</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dannsa</td>
<td>dance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dannsa-ceum</td>
<td>step-dancing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Druma</td>
<td>drum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feadan</td>
<td>chanter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fèis</td>
<td>festival</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fèisean</td>
<td>festivals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fèisean nan Gàidheal</td>
<td>National Association of Gaelic Arts Youth Tuition Festivals (literally, festival of the Gaels)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fìdeag</td>
<td>tin whistle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fidheall</td>
<td>fiddle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fìdhlear</td>
<td>fiddle player</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gàidheal</td>
<td>Gael</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gàidhealtachd</td>
<td>the Highlands and Islands</td>
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<td>Gàidhlig</td>
<td>Gaelic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giotàr</td>
<td>guitar</td>
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<tr>
<td>Luchd-teagaisg</td>
<td>teachers and tutors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meur-chlar</td>
<td>keyboards</td>
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<tr>
<td>Òran</td>
<td>song</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pìob</td>
<td>bagpipe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pìobaire</td>
<td>piper</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pìobaireachd</td>
<td>pipe music</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sgoil</td>
<td>school</td>
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abbreviations

useful websites

SAC Scottish Arts Council
HIDB Highlands and Islands Development Board
HIE Highlands and Islands Enterprise
HRC/HC Highland Regional Council (now Highland Council)
ICCI Ionad Chaluim Chille Ilé
LEC Local Enterprise Company
RSAMD Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama
PnE Pròiseact nan Ealan (Gaelic Arts Project)
SMO Sabhal Mor Ostaig (The Gaelic College)
TMSA Traditional Music and Song Association
YMI Youth Music Initiative

Blas festival
Bòrd na Gàidhlig:
ClannGàidhlig
Comunn na Gàidhlig:
Lews Castle College Benbecula Centre:
Fèisean nan Gàidheal:
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Pròiseact nan Ealan:

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The first Gaelic fèis was held on the island of Barra in 1981, involving 120 children in learning the song, music and dance of their native Gaelic culture. Twenty-five years later, there are over forty fèisean located throughout the Highlands and Islands and beyond, with some 13,000 young people involved in traditional Gaelic arts tuition each year.

Over the past quarter-century the growth of the fèis movement has become a remarkable success story. This book celebrates that achievement by presenting some of the experiences, views and images of people who have contributed to the work of the fèis in the past twenty-five years.