

The Brownsbank Experience November 2002-2005

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I offer this as a general reflection on what the residency at Brownsbank Cottage over the last three years has meant to me, and what difference I feel it has made. I will look at how it has helped me to develop as a writer and teacher/literature development professional; what some of the satisfying outcomes have been; my relationship with Brownsbank as a place; and things that helped or would have helped. The detail of events and initiatives can be found in my bi-monthly reports to the committee.

My creative life

I had completed the first draft of a novel during a period of support from a Scottish Arts Council bursary in 2001. For the first 18 months at Brownsbank I focussed on this as my creative project, completing three further drafts. I am still not happy that the novel is publishable/readable. This is a pity for Brownsbank as it reduces the number of concrete public outputs of my residency. However, in terms of the creative process and my learning, this has been an incredibly valuable experience which I almost certainly would not have had without the period of concentrated work which the residency allowed. I also think there is good material in the novel and I propose to reconsider it fairly soon. I am now inclined to think of my decision to write a novel as a poor artistic judgement – i.e. it arose from perceived pressure to write a novel, rather than short fiction, in order to be taken seriously.

I have returned thankfully to what seems to be my more natural form in short stories, and writing for radio and this has been productive. I have had four short stories, a 10-part abridgement of *The Rainbow* and two plays broadcast by BBC Radio Four during my time at Brownsbank. I have also scripted a programme for Radio Scotland, written a set of wildlife poems for children published as part of a pack by Scottish Natural Heritage, and was short listed for 'Evolve', a programme run by Playwrights' Studio for a new stage play. I have also completed a second collection of short stories. The manuscript of *The Searching Glance* is currently with an agent, and I hope it will find a publisher before too long.

It is also worth noting that whilst I have not been very visible in terms of publication during my residency, Brownsbank has definitely helped to increase my profile as a writer. I have no doubt that it led to invitations to read at Wigtown Book Festival in 2004, to New York in 2003 and 2004 for readings and workshops, and to publish work in the first issue (this month) of a new literary magazine *Southlight*.

Professional development in teaching/literature development

Although I am an experienced teacher and facilitator, the Brownsbank residency has given me a great opportunity to develop my skills much more fully in the context of helping others to enjoy and develop their creative writing. I have been able to work with a great many different types of audience in a great many forms. This has included giving feedback to individual writers; providing workshops and workshop series for writers' groups and collected individuals either myself or through invited literature professionals; working with school groups of all ages from P2 to Advanced Higher; working with literacy and essential skills groups; running two professional development days for English and Drama teachers for South Lanarkshire Council;

running a weekend residential course 'Writing Nature'; contributing to a librarians' professional development day; editing a small short story anthology; and working with a Museum Education Officer to run creative response workshops with young children and original art in ten schools, leading to an exhibition at Lows Park Museum, '*Picture This*'.

There has been an element of experimentation in many of these projects, and time to reflect on the process and outcomes which I have found invaluable to my development as a teacher and facilitator. There has often been an opportunity to try an activity or idea out again with the benefit of hindsight. Contact with professional organisations such as the Scottish Book Trust, National Association of Writers in Education and Literature Training, as well as the Teachers and Writers Collaborative in New York has also enhanced this development. During the residency, some of these organisations have also asked me to write articles reflecting on my experience¹.

I have channelled experience gained from working with writers in South Lanarkshire into a national project as a member of the steering group for the Scottish Book Trust's *words@work* project. This initiative provides professional development opportunities to Scottish writers and helping to guide it has been very rewarding, as well as providing opportunities for myself e.g. writing in a business context, writing for stage workshops.

My teaching experience has been a stepping stone to other work such as mentoring African writers on the British Council/Lancaster University *Crossing Borders* project. It has helped me secure freelance work post-Brownsbank including working on the Scottish Executive/Scottish Arts Council *Arts across the Curriculum* project in Dumfries and Galloway, and an invitation to contribute to an Arvon Foundation course at Moniack Mhor for the first time.

Brownsbank has given me the skills and confidence to make the transition between a writing life that was an adjunct to a demanding job, and making my writing life my work. I intend to depart from Brownsbank as a freelance writer and creative writing teacher. (Cue: tighten the belt!)

Highlights

Some of the particular highlights I look back on include:

- People telling me they were stimulated to seek opportunities, submit work to competitions, etc through the quarterly Brownsbank Bulletin.
- Over the three years I had time to see a number of writers growing in skill and confidence and achieving success. For example in recent months there have been winners from South Lanarkshire writers in the Eildon Tree short story competition, McCash Scots language poetry competition, the Scottish

¹ *Speaking funny, seeing afresh*, for Teachers and Writers magazine, New York – a discussion of my creative writing residencies in Scotland and New York. January 2004;
First steps to Publication, for 'The Directory of Publishing in Scotland 2004', Scottish Publishers Association;
How Did I Get Here? for publication on www.literaturetraining.com, 2005

International Poetry Competition, and the Northern Echo Short Story Competition. Several writers have also had work accepted for magazines and anthologies of serious literary merit in Scotland and the UK including *Cutting Teeth*, *the British Poetry Anthology*, and *Dance the Guns to Silence*, an anthology to commemorate ten years since the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa.

- Witnessing the delight taken by children in writing and having their work recognised. The excitement of two girls at Tinto After School Club when they wrote the line: 'I wish I could touch the galloping of flowers', and the confident and lively work of several young writers in 'Biggar Little Stories'. (This more than compensates for occasional comments like 'I hate writing' or 'I don't know what to put'!)
- A feeling of a writing community developing from East Kilbride to Biggar, as demonstrated by convivial *Poetry, Prose and Pints* open reading evenings monthly since February 05 which have drawn in people from different areas and groups.
- The development of writers' groups and growth in their numbers across the region to eight. The consolidation of some groups such as the Biggar one grown considerably from its two members; Clyde Valley finding new ways of mutual support and a platform for their work on-line; a number of groups undertaking ambitious publication projects of their own work.
- The poetry boards in Biggar High Street have provided a satisfying way of giving a public platform four times a year to selected work, and has involved members of the wider community e.g. library, bookshop, etc in the selection process.
- Brownsbank involvement in the Biggar Little Festival has provided an excellent focus and a platform for local writing through publication (poetry postcards, 'Biggar Little Stories') and public events. In particular the consecutive stages - a stimulus workshop for schools and community; a 'competition' or call for entries; selection for publication; and a launch event - have created a momentum and sustained interest through a six month period. The high quality of the 'Biggar Little Stories' has been particularly gratifying given the difficulties of the short story form.

The place

Brownsbank Cottage has been an iconic and intriguing place to be attached to for the last three years. I enjoyed the sense of being one of a number of people connected to a creative life there. Staying there as much as I did in the first half of the residency made it familiar and I enjoyed a sense of being part of its legacy and passing this onto visitors. The Doors Open Days, workshops at the cottage for writers' groups and small school groups, and visits by bodies like Scottish PEN and the Scots Language Society were particularly rewarding, especially when they also involved local writers and volunteers from the Biggar Museum Trust. In my view the two nights of storytelling in the cottage as part of the Biggar Little Festival and Scottish International Storytelling Festival in 2004 and 2005, made particularly good use of the venue and its special atmosphere.

Although there was no requirement to produce work connected to Brownsbank, I was quickly drawn to Valda's story. The process of researching, imagining, writing and

producing the radio play *The Best Snow for Skiing*² has been a very significant creative event for me. It gave me a way into the Brownsbank story that I have found fascinating and accessible. Professionally, this project enabled me to forge closer links with writers and publishers of MacDiarmid's era, the literary community in Cornwall, and the world of theatre, which would not otherwise have been possible. I think it will also have helped me secure a reputation with BBC Radio Drama which will serve me well in the future. I still hope the play will appear on stage one day. This connection between my imaginative life and the cottage has consolidated for me a tangible and memorable sense of place which I will retain with great affection.

Things that (would have) helped

- The Brownsbank Committee have been wonderfully supportive, creative and hard-working. They have also been flexible and trusting in their attitude to the way I have run the fellowship.
- Funds from *Live Literature Scotland* for events involving visiting writers/publishers were invaluable as was an *Awards for All* grant which made a series of workshops and publication projects possible in 2003-4, and a donation from *OpenInk* which paid for the printing of *Biggar Little Stories* in 2005.
- The legacy of the previous fellows meant there was already in place a network of interested people, groups and institutions, and a considerable wealth of skill. It was easy to build on this expectation and interest. The existence of 'open doors', meant that a number of people, places and networks became instrumental in adding value to my efforts, or me to theirs, at different times including Lanark Library, clydevalley.net, Hamilton Town House, Low Parks Museum, Wiston Lodge, local newspapers, Atkinson-Pryce Bookshop, Wyndales Hotel, etc.
- The use of e-mail for communication helped enormously in building audiences and a community of interest of a considerable size.
- The expansion in the number of writing groups across the region meant that intensive work with all of them became impossible. Fostering the groups' autonomy and sustainability seems to me a good aim. The bulletin helped to communicate news between groups, and various events allowed for members of different groups to come together. However, I still wonder whether the residency might feel more effective for some of the audiences if the geography were more constricted, thus allowing for more intensive involvement by the fellow.
- A longer planning cycle after the first year might have helped with the development of some projects, as opposed to year-on-year contracts. It would also have been useful to have had a more clearly defined budget in addition to the sums raised from LLS etc to allow for planning each year.
- Greater continuity of staff and contacts within the arts team at SLC might have enhanced the collaborative possibilities there.
- More communication with other writers-in-residence across Scotland, and knowledge of their programmes and projects might have stimulated interesting ideas and allowed for more collaboration and sharing of information. After a very interesting gathering of writers-in-residence in October 2002, there seemed to be little clear method for facilitating this. Hopefully the proposed

² Broadcast BBC Radio Four 14/7/05

development of a Scottish network for the National Association for Literature Development will go some way to providing this.

- I would have liked to have provided more opportunities for creative use of the cottage and its history by other people and groups. This sometimes felt difficult due to space restrictions. I think a purpose-built study centre nearby would be an excellent development!

LJC 8/11/05