

Storytelling in Dornoch

By Staff Reporter

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HISTORYLINKS Dornoch held two creative writing workshops last weekend as part of its Sutherland Longhouse project, examining pre-Clearance life.

It is focused on the settlement at Dalnamain on the road to Loch Buidhe.

The weekend workshops were led by inspiring author, Janis Mackay on Saturday, followed by a session of storytelling on Sunday afternoon.

Nine children joined Janis at Dornoch Social Club on Saturday morning. Janis delivered short exercises that gradually guided the children into writing from their imagination. With the help of pictures, she spoke of what life would have been like in the Highlands 250 years ago. The children were asked to imagine they were a character living in the eighteenth century.

To take them deeper into their characters, the children wrote down the smells and sounds they imagined would have been associated with that time. They gave their imagined character an age, hair



Tim and Luke Fairns reciting a Gaelic poem about the beauty of springtime.

colour and style, and a name.

Janis has written a series of three novels about time travel, and she read an extract from *The Accidental Time Traveller* where a girl from an earlier century meets a modern day boy. Inspired by the author's writing, and with their own imagined character from the past ready and waiting, the children settled down to write a piece about how they suddenly found themselves in the past, meeting their imagined character.

The children then gathered in a group to read out their spontaneous imaginings – the results were magical and marvellous, a tribute both to Janis' ability to engage and draw out latent creativity and to the children's imaginative power and willingness to go with the flow.

After lunch, Janis led the afternoon workshop, this time with 11 adults.

Their first two tasks were to write a piece in three minutes using no words containing the letter "e"



Storyteller Janis Mackay weaves her magic within the cosy Dornoch Castle Hotel.

and then, again in three minutes, to write a piece with words of one syllable only.

Janis talked about the importance of sense memory and recall, and set the task for participants to write about what they saw, heard and smelled on their journey to the workshop.

In turn, each participant shared a line of their writing to create a collage of images evoking the collective journey to the workshop.

Participants were also asked to write a list of smells, sounds or tastes associated with childhood memories, and then to take one of these and write about it in more depth, following wherever the memory led.

Focusing on the same sense, the next exercise was to write a list of smells, sounds or tastes associated in the imagination with pre-clearance times, finally choosing one from the list to explore in greater

depth – imagining and empathising with a character from those times.

The result was a series of sensitive, moving and lyrical snapshots of life now and life then, and the intertwining of the two.

On Sunday afternoon, a group of people gathered in the welcoming Dornoch Castle Hotel to get cosy in front of the warming open fire, with tea and home-made cakes to hand to listen to Janis weaving a magical fabric of tales from past times, interspersed with haunting fiddle music from Tricia Andrew and Heather Muir.

They also heard the lilt of the Gaelic tongue spoken beautifully by Luke and Tim Fairns, and enjoyed impromptu contributions from the company, and to drift back in time to the ceilidh gatherings long before TV, long before video and the big screen, and long before computer and internet!