

Diversity and excellence

Ian Edwards looks at Scotland's infinite variety, and the opportunities it offers interpreters.

Scotland is a small country, tiny by world standards, yet it shows a remarkable diversity in both environment and culture. The challenge for interpreters is to celebrate and explore this diversity with local and international audiences, many of whom share a stereotypical view of Scotland and the Scots which is still perpetuated by some of our tourist industry.

Location, location, location

Scotland's position on the far western seaboard of Europe explains why we have such diverse environments. Travelling from Fife in the east to Argyll in the west takes less than three hours by car, but the average annual rainfall in Pittenweem (Fife) is one third less than in Lochgilphead (Argyll). In North America you might travel across several states to find a similar difference in rainfall. There is an even greater ecological contrast between the alpine-arctic flora on the high tops of the Cairngorm mountains and the Logan Botanic Garden in Galloway, where the warm air above the Gulf Stream creates a climate in which exotic plants can flourish. So much for the myth that the whole of Scotland is cold and wet!

Who are we?

The people of Scotland are diverse too: recent work on the Scottish gene pool has confirmed that there is no single distinct Scottish race. Waves of immigration from Scandinavia, Continental Europe, Ireland and from across the border with England have left a diverse genetic legacy. It would be impossible to define anyone as having 'Scottish blood'. The whole cultural identity of the country in terms of language, dialect, architecture, land husbandry, music, customs and religion reflects this legacy. It forms a diverse heritage for Scots to be proud of – and to fascinate visitors.

Often this natural and cultural diversity are entirely intertwined. A good example is the beautiful chapel of Rosslyn, about ten miles south of Edinburgh, perched on the edge of the spectacular wooded glen of the River Esk. This is no grand cathedral, yet it is acknowledged as one of Britain's most important architectural masterpieces. Inside, virtually every inch of the walls is carved with floral, figurative or fantastical images. Scores of leafy carvings of Green Men reflect the native oak woodlands of the Esk valley and are linked to a pan-European cultural tradition. Other carvings may show exotic new world plants like 'Indian' corn and pineapple, reputed to show linkages with the Princes of Orkney, pre-Columbian transatlantic crossings and the Norse seafaring tradition.

Rosslyn, like all our heritage sites, has a huge number of stories to tell. Some of them are historically accurate, some part of the oral tradition and others pure romanticism. All these stories are valid, adding value to the site and creating a diversity and complexity that is both a gift and a challenge to the interpreter. With such riches to choose from I have often thought that being a guide at Rosslyn Chapel would be a wonderful job. You could tell your audience a different set of tales every day and never get bored!

The ebb and flow of immigration and emigration which continues to this day, and the environmental changes all around us provide a thread throughout Scotland's diversity stories. Ice retreating, trees coming in; wolves and bears disappearing, cereal farmers and domestic livestock arriving; Caledonian pine forests felled, Sitka spruce plantations established; Vikings invading, Highlanders embarking for the New Worlds. Scotland has a history and natural history as tempestuous as anywhere in the world, providing the 'bread-and-butter' of interpretation scripts at all our visitor sites. Yet while the national heritage bodies, represented by Interpret Scotland, provide visitors with this context of continual change, many of the more commercial tourism enterprises continue to exploit the heather, tartan and shortbread image that is frozen in time and place.

Looking to the future

What of diversity now and in the future? Are we as heritage interpreters in a position to consider the big 'change' issues of the early twenty-first century, like global climate change and immigration from Eastern Europe? A better understanding of our complex history should enable us to appreciate the impact these new changes will have and help us adapt more easily. Polish delicatessens are appearing on street corners in all our main cities and one in five babies born in Edinburgh during the first part of this year had East European parents. Will our long experience of immigration make it easier to absorb new communities? How quickly will 'their' culture be seen as 'our' culture, to be interpreted alongside the distinctive legacies of other immigrants of the past? These new communities are also new audiences and provide us with an unparalleled opportunity to develop interpretation that reflects these changes as they happen.

Scotland's diverse natural habitats are also responding to climate change in diverse ways. The drier east side is getting drier, at least in summer, and the wetter west is getting wetter, especially in winter. That a small country can show such a variety of contrasting trends has been important in planning interpretation on climate change as part of the new Gateway interpretation centre at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. But showing the future is more difficult than showing the past. We need interpretation media that reflect and accept how difficult it is to predict with confidence what will happen in the future. Consequently we have to choose systems that are easy to update, edit or redesign as new knowledge becomes available. In future, the distinction between interpretation and news presentation will become

blurred, as the need to present the very latest information on topical issues becomes paramount.

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Scotland small? Our multiform, our infinite Scotland small?
Only as a patch of hillside may be a cliché corner
To a fool who cries 'Nothing but heather!'
Hugh MacDiarmid