

Quinie on Calton Hill

A song-based walking tour, 17 October 2024

Quinie (Josie Vallely) is a Glasgow based musician whose work investigates language, landscape, tradition, and identity. She sings Scots songs, experimenting with composition and vocal technique to create dialogue between pipes and voice.

I have been asked to contribute a piece of work by Collective, alongside their current Satellites exhibition. The curation of the show is woven with a theme of the Irish proverb, ‘Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine’, roughly translating as ‘people live in each other’s shadows’, meaning, ‘we rely on each other for shelter.’ Both a shade and a shadow, this kind of shelter encompasses the positive and negative aspects of being part of a community, living in the shadow of each other and our ancestors.

The works in the exhibition explore the complex nature of inheritance, prompting questions about how we process and understand what has been passed down. This inheritance may be material, cultural, genetic, or spiritual — and often both wanted and unwanted. These legacies shape how we inhabit ourselves and the world in the present day and into the future.

I was happy to be asked to engage with the work, and the place of Calton Hill, to produce a performance of song and walking for people to join. The following text outlines some of my research and the themes I will be exploring in this piece.

Recently I have been exploring how we share tradition and how this relates to our places. I wrote a short book after a residency in April 2024, *Forefowk Mind Me*, which explores these themes. A number of the ideas that emerged are relevant in the context of Calton Hill.

Place as country

When I am talking about place, I don’t mean just a geographical, physical space. I see ‘place’ as a big net that catches in it all the things, relationships and knowledge that are linked together by that location. This understanding is inspired by the Indigenous Australian use of the word country. Country is the term used to describe the lands, waterways, and seas and how they are connected to complex ideas about law, place, custom, language, spiritual belief, cultural practice, material sustenance, family and identity.

“Country is the way humans and non-humans co-become, the way that we emerge together, have always emerged together and will always emerge together. It is all the feelings, the songs and ceremonies. The things we cannot understand and cannot touch, the things that go beyond us, that anchor us in eternity in the Infinite cycles of kinship, sharing and responsibility. Country is a way we mix and merge, the way we are different and yet become together, are part of each other.”

Song Spirals
by Gay’wu group of women

So, for this piece of work I have been imagining Calton Hill as country—holding an archive of knowledge, experiences and stories. In particular, it can teach us about time—about our human historical time, our daily time, our geographical time and seasonal time.

Takkin the swatch o the land an its life

I think it makes a huge difference when you leave your house, whether you think you are walking into location, which is simply dead space which you are crossing so that you can get to where you need to go, or whether you believe you are walking into a living universe. If you believe the second, then your walk becomes a different thing.

John O'Donohue

Before I start to expand these themes, I want to reflect on Calton Hill as a physical space. A big lump of volcanic rock covered in plants, paths and people. The hill offers 'the best view in Edinburgh'. Here, you see the Castle (lost from the Castle itself) and Arthur's Seat (not visible from Arthur's Seat). It sits above town as a vantage point and sister of the 5 hills that surround it. The breeze comes off the sea, with the haar that colours Edinburgh grey.

From the hill I can see all of the landmarks of my childhood. The far end of Musselburgh Bay, to Berwick Law with its whale bones, and the Bass Rock. Salisbury Crags and Arthur's Seat ('a mountain in virtue of its bold design'). The Old Town's roofs and spires. The Dumbiedykes, out over the sea to Fife, the slopes of Hillend, the well-worn paths of the Braids. The scarred astroturf-short grass around the Calton monuments is testament to the significance of this view.

But what if we look at Calton Hill instead of from it? We see plants growing, in the face of exposure, erosion, fires. Broom and gorse with their determined yellow flowers. Pines, broadleaf woodland, scrub. A Seagull wheels overhead.

Last year in September, 38 species of invertebrate were recorded. Along Hume Walk West there were 3 species of shield bug. Along the southerly Regent's Walk, 5 species of ladybird. Time spent on this seemingly barren bit of rock can reward the bird watcher—peregrines, chiffchaffs, wrens, robins, dunnocks, squalls of long-tailed tits.

We can study in minute detail the Bonfire-moss, or like Robert Louis Stevenson did, we can look up and out, '*the towns of Fifeshire sit, each in its bank of blowing smoke, along the opposite coast, and the hills enclose the view, except to the farthest east, where the haze of the horizon rests upon the open sea. There lies the road to Norway.*'

Place as timekeeper

Place is an eternally growing archive. With its monuments and memories, it is one of the most important means we have of orienting ourselves in time.

"It is the character of such a prospect, to be full of change and of things moving. The multiplicity embarrasses the eye; and the mind, among so much, suffers itself to grow absorbed with single points. You remark a tree in a hedgerow or follow a cart along a country road. You turn to the city, and see children, dwarfed by distance... at play about suburban doorsteps; you have a glimpse upon a thoroughfare where people are densely moving; you note ridge after ridge of chimney-stacks running downhill one behind another, and church spires rising bravely from the sea of roofs. At one of the innumerable windows, you watch a figure moving; on one of the multitude of roofs, you watch clambering chimney-sweeps. The

wind takes a run and scatters the smoke; bells are heard, far and near, faint and loud, to tell the hour; or perhaps a bird goes dipping evenly over the housetops, like a gull across the waves. And here you are in the meantime, on this pastoral hillside, among nibbling sheep and looked upon by monumental buildings."

Robert Louis Stevenson

For me, the multiplicity of Calton Hill means it is a place that tracks seasonal, biographical, and geological time. Its nature marks the relentless passing of the seasons. With its monuments and geographical bulk, it orientates us in the wider human story, years, centuries, and millennia.

Calton Hill is the place where I have always associated the marking of Beltane. As a teenager, wearing a rainbow scarf that ended at my knees, and unsuitable footwear, I sat on a rock in the dark watching people I vaguely knew spinning fire while painted green. I don't think I fully grasped that this marking—an ancient Iron Age Celtic ritual that celebrates the return of the summer—would instill in me an interest and connection with marking seasonal changes and understanding the traditions of the place I lived.

The great thing about Edinburgh is how integrated the city is with the land around it. Beltane celebrates our enduring connection with the natural world even in urban settings. The festival has gone from its five or so performers on that first night in the late 1980s, to a celebration made up of hundreds of volunteers and thousands upon thousands of participants.

Learning about places during childhood is strongly influenced by the direct experience of

playing, as well as through the role of family, culture, and community. The special bond which develops between children and their childhood environments has been called a “primal landscape” by human geographers. This landscape forms part of an individual’s identity and is a key point of comparison for considering places later on. As people move around as adults, they tend to consider new places in relation to this primal landscape. Perhaps then it is no surprise that I love to revisit Edinburgh’s hills. There are dozens of cities around the world that claim to be built on seven hills. Just like Edinburgh, the majority of these need a bit of artistic license to fit the bill. Edinburgh was only really built on one very prominent hill – the Castle Rock. Everything outside of that was slowly absorbed into the city and even Calton Hill was isolated until a few hundred years ago.

But its prominence in the city, and its visibility, meant that alongside its geographical, seasonal and cultural time keeping it was roped into more formal routines. Historically, at one in the afternoon, a time ball on the summit of Nelson’s flagstaff was lowered, and, far off in the distance, a puff of smoke followed by a burst from the one o’clock gun at the Castle. Then everyone could set their watches, as far off as the seacoast or the hill farms of the Pentlands.

Place as elder

In many traditions across the world, including those indigenous to Scotland, Elders are essential tradition bearers and holders of cultural knowledge. While an Elder’s role may vary from one community to another, they commonly uphold and instill core principles like respect

for the land, sea and sky. Elders share their knowledge, educating others about stewardship and Indigenous practices. In my own life, many of my Elders have passed or, sadly, did not have culture passed on to them. Our innate knowledge of what is sacred and worth keeping has been destroyed over time, so we could be employed to then destroy other peoples. To what extent can we counter this by building connections with new places and letting them teach us? The stories that places tell can become a means of confronting the legacy of imperialism and challenging dominant narratives. It can show us what we have lost, and what there is to gain by reconnecting with it.

Embracing a place as an Elder allows us to have conversations that our human Elders have forgotten or don’t want to talk about. In doing so it can reveal to us the reality of our histories and the complexities of power and privilege.

Calton Hill’s contribution to accurate time keeping facilitated naval navigation and became a significant enabler for the expansion of trade and empire from the Port of Leith, which was a key importer and exporter of goods to and from slave plantations in the Caribbean.

“There are struggles in the landscape, which although not immediately visible to the eye, have inhabited the land from the earliest times, and continue to do so: different perceptions of what the landscape means and wanted to support, questions of how it should be used and by whom. These are knitted into its history. Evidence is present for its use as a sacred space, shared space, routeway and symbol of power.”

Rachel Butter

The buildings of Calton Hill remind us of the colonial might that inflicted violence and harm across the world and continues to do so today. Another reminder of determined fights for agency lies in a demurer monument down the hill a little.

*ha’e faith
in Scotland’s hidden poo’ers.
The present’s theirs
but a’ the past and future’s oors.
Hugh MacDiarmid*

This poem appears on a plaque on a cairn commemorating the vigil for the Scottish Parliament, a continuous protest that began after the fourth Conservative general election victory in 1992 and lasted for 1,980 days until September 11, 1997, when Scotland voted for devolution and the restoration of its Parliament. On top of the small monument is a brazier that was kept burning throughout the vigil. The cairn includes stones from historically significant sites, including Robert Burns’ cottage in Mauchline, Robert the Bruce’s castle at Lochmaben, Ben Nevis, Paris, and the Auschwitz concentration camp.

Places with story

Some geographic places have a sense of place and some do not. Placeless landscapes, like airports, have no special relationship to where they are located—they could be anywhere. The term sense of place is used in many different ways. It is a multidimensional, complex construct used to characterise the relationship between people and spaces. It can be defined as the experiential and expressive ways places are known, imagined, yearned for, held, remembered, voiced, lived, contested and struggled over. Places with story.

Often, I am told that my songs have a strong sense of place. I think people mean that they feel like they ‘come from’ a place. In folk traditions or cultures, the gathering and sharing of stories holds a special significance. Like places, songs and stories become vessels for preserving cultural heritage, transmitting knowledge from generation to generation. The idea of the ‘carrying stream’ is one that crops up often in the discussion around the transmission of tradition in Scotland. Coined by Hamish Henderson (who, coincidentally set up the first Calton Hill Beltane Celebration), the term captures how traditions wind their way through time and space, shaped by the people and places they encounter, constantly evolving yet with a shared source.

*‘Maker, ye maun sing them....
Tomorrow, songs
Will flow free again, and new voices
Be borne on the carrying stream.’*
Hamish Henderson

Tradition is a process of collecting. Ursula Le Guin, in her ‘carrier bag of fiction’ essay, shares the idea that the first tool, rather than being a weapon, was probably a vessel or bag for gathering. Le Guin’s essay helped me see my building relationship with place in the context of a wider approach to creating narratives and stories. The process she describes reminds me of the collecting, creating, recording, performing, sharing and saving that is inherent to the development of a repertoire of song. Hearing, hearing again, finding, practicing, reiterating, choosing the colors, shifting, recombining but ultimately bringing together. I think in a Scottish context we can see this carrier bag as a burn or

stream into which tradition is constantly flowing and shifting.

I hope you will enjoy joining me in meeting Calton Hill, and getting to know it by moving through it and following its stream. In itself, this is a ceremony or ritual, if you want it to be. The significance of a walk can be tied to the meaning of a destination or focused more on what is along the way. Personally, I tend to find that place *“gives itself most completely when I have no destination, when I reach nowhere in particular, but have gone out merely to be with the mountain as one visits a friend with no intention but to be with him.”*

Nan Shepherd

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