TRUE NORTH

FROM DOCUMENTATION TO RE-WRITING HISTORY

True North is a series of conferences organised by Timespan under the paradigm 'North'. This publication is a link between the first True North Conference in 2015 and the second in 2016. It draws on the themes of each conference, documentation and re-writing history, enhancing the connections between those themes through commissioned contributions from a variety of disciplines.

Editor: Anna Insa Vermehren
Proof Reading: Linda Purves
Conference Photography: Gavin Macqueen
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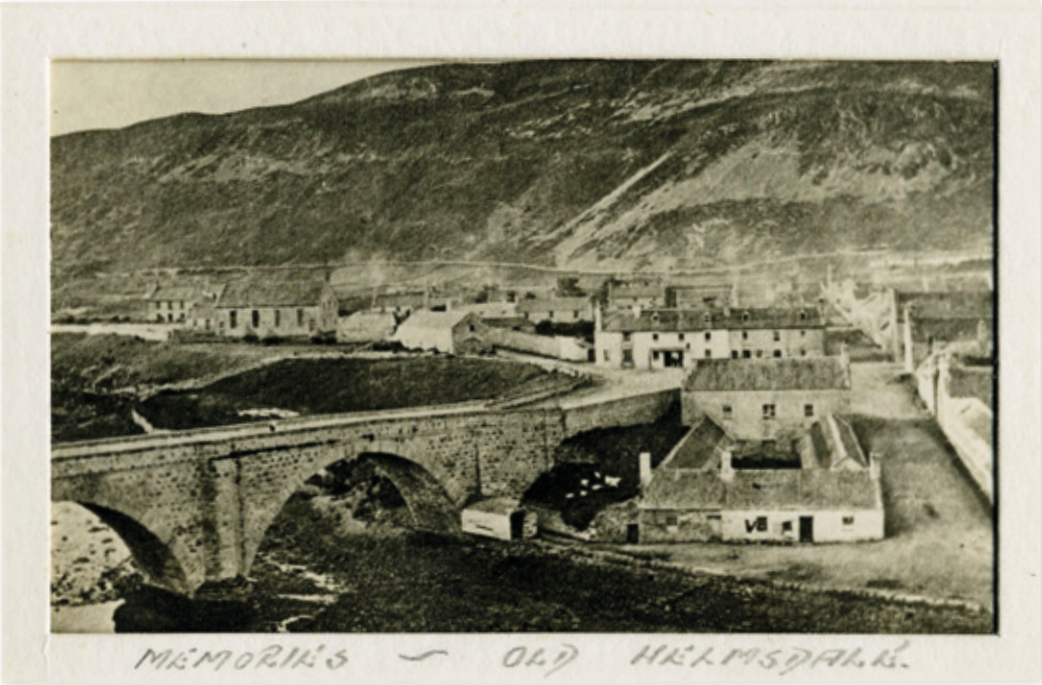
CROSSING THE BRIDGE

by Anna Vermehren,
Director, Timespan



Helmsdale is a village of eight hundred people on the North-East coast of Sutherland, Scotland. Its gorse-clad hills and wide tumbling river strike into the glitter of the North Sea. You can find memory and longing in the landscape, and history buried in the ground; the history of people living in this area for over six thousand years.

The village as we see it today is a planned fishing and crofting community that has been here for just over two centuries. Life in Helmsdale is vibrant. People like to gather and tell their stories, and they are invested in the past as well as looking into the future. Community-led regeneration shapes the way.

Helmsdale is where Timespan operates as a 'meeting place between our past, our present and our future'. We work here on making connections, drawing out themes, presenting ideas and bringing in people from afar. With a keen sense of place and identity, we have built our programme around the concept of the North. We look outwards for inspiration and new understandings of our Northern context, while at the same time we collect, preserve and interpret the past.

In 2015 we started a series of annual True North Conferences. The first, held from the 5–7 March 2015, was entitled *True North: Recording the Past, Present and Future.* This subject seemed especially pertinent, not only for us as an organisation working within art and heritage, but because documentation concerns all of us. It is a peculiarly human endeavour to document experiences, actions, facts and objects. Documentation plays a role in preservation, research, evaluation, and innovation. The themes we explored at the conference spanned archiving and accessibility, event documentation and evaluation techniques, documenting art-works in participatory practices, documentation as artistic strategy, genealogy and self-documentation, and digital documentation in the cultural sector. Many of these themes you will find featured in this book.

This book also forms a bridge to 2016's True North Conference: *Re-writing History.* It opens up considerations of ways of interpreting, of questioning the dominant popular conception of particular historical narratives. New themes emerge: what does re-writing history mean in a Northern context? What creative means can we employ to evaluate and renew methodologies of writing history? In what ways is myth making and storytelling part of writing histories? How do we want to write our histories for the future?

Peter Davidson's contribution *The Gaps and Absences in the Northern Record* considers the difficulties inherent within the Northern historical record, and looks at the Netherlands as an example of a rich record with detailed documentation, both written and visual. He notes that the practice of evoking a sense of place within a record was not widely adopted until recently. The iconophobia of the northern protestant society in the sixteenth century resulted in the destruction of many artefacts that now constitute gaps in our Northern records. What is left are predominantly markings in landscape, built heritage such as tombstones, and an oral tradition of songs and poems.

Lisa Collinson looks at particular artefacts from the past and offers us *Medieval Nordic Sources: A Short Artists' Guide* suggesting that medieval Nordic sources could be of interest to artists of all disciplines. Guldgubbar and the powerful Skaldic verse inspire; historic texts on religion and mythology, and ancient documents of legal justice provide new views. She recommends Inger M Boberg's *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature* as an excellent resource for research, and invites us to engage in dialogue with scholars directly.

"The future is always fiction until we make it real." *Future Horizons* by Sue Reid Sexton tells an imagined story of an isolated community on a remote peninsula driven to create their own island utopia. Using innovative technologies for communication and generating power, building an economy and society, the island soon presents itself as an inspirational model of self-sufficiency for similar localities. Inevitable disasters and triumphs ensue, but an enduring community spirit remains despite the questions and problems they face. The story is inspired by *Possible Scotland,* a tour that Sue undertook in her van with Lateral North in 2015.

Nicky Bird's photo-essay *From Car Showroom to Casino: A Midlothian Site of History* pieces together a history of Nivensknowe Miners Social Welfare Club in Midlothian. Known locally as the 'Casino', the club opened in 1958 in a blaze of modernism and Vegas-style glamour, only to fall into obscurity after burning down a decade later. The artist recounts a trip to Bilston, the local mining village, to uncover the story of the club. Gathering memories and photographs from local figures both present at the time and from second-hand accounts imparts a mythic quality to the place, a history that is invisible in the landscape. These visual and aural fragments speak to the balance of agendas between artist and subject, the difficulties of getting the story you are interested in as opposed to the story you are told.

In *Modes of Self-presentation in the North,* Matt Sillars traces the development of photography as a mode of self-presentation in the context of the North, beginning with Victorian photographers Valentine and Wilson and their postcard representations of the North for tourists, and touching on the 112-year legacy of portraiture by the Johnston photographic firm, Wick. The 20th century move towards photography as homemade documentation of ordinary lives is detailed, bringing us to the disposable selfies and profile pictures of today, and the ongoing romanticisation of North via platforms such as Instagram and Twitter. The author suggests that in the future, self-presentation in the North will become a 'glocal' (global in the local) mode.

By making this book, we wanted to create a resource that adds to, and leads beyond, the content of the conference while offering a similar cross-disciplinary outlook. You will find quotes, images and transcripts from the True North Conference 2015, a two-dimensional choreography by Robbie Synge, and a methodology of five-minute presentations by Lisa Collinson.

This book is intended to engage in a discussion that adds to the current practices of documentation and the writing of history because we believe that people in the present have the power to shape the histories of the future.

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January 2016

“Things can only get better

What’s around the corner, who can tell?

I’ll build a little place just north of heaven

I’m kinda tired of living south of hell.”

‘North of Heaven’ by Edwyn Collins,
Sung by Ross Sinclair at the
True North Conference,
7 March 2015

THE GAPS AND ABSENCES IN THE NORTHERN RECORD

by Peter Davidson,
Campion Hall, University of Oxford

When Timespan first asked me to write about the archive of northern Scotland, the written and visual record of the past in those territories which we might call the North, the first image to come into my mind was purely visual: a bright winter day, bare slopes above the sea, a walled-about graveyard on the hill, carved headstones momentarily legible in the stark, raking light. I suppose that this particular image came to mind because it carries within itself a motto about the *fragility of stone.* In any other light, particularly any kind of shadowed light of morning or evening, any rainlight, any light diffused by mist or haar, the lettering on old gravestones sinks back illegible into the stone. It is only the merciless horizon-raking light of the depth of winter, brilliant sun over grass and heather-stems serrated with frost, which brings the letters back out of time.

This is a condition of engagement with the reticent north. The kind of historical record which may be abundant elsewhere (for many different reasons in different places) the lavish recording of details of daily life, are absent. Even convulsive events for society and community may only be recorded in the laconic notes of clerks working hundreds of miles away. It is unlikely above all that we can recover any notion of how any individual living and working in a familiar and beloved northern landscape may have felt at any given time.

This is to some degree a condition of remoteness from administrative centres, but great caution is needed in ascribing remoteness to a place in past centuries when the chief means of transport was by sea rather than by sparsely-disposed and seasonally-viable roadways. Nowhere with an outlet to the sea, with a jetty or shelter built out into the cool silver of the northern water, is entirely isolated. The connections are not always with the places which seem near at hand now at the end of the centuries of the road and the railways—three centuries ago the journey by road from Aberdeen to Edinburgh could take two weeks, the crossing from Aberdeen to Bergen could take less than two days. (The whole cultural orientation of the east coast of Scotland is governed by the ease of access by sea to Scandinavia and the Low Countries, a fact too easily forgotten, but visible to this day in the shaping of Scottish Law, of Edinburgh as a northern European capital having little in common with the other great cities of Britain.)

Even with these caveats, it is worth considering how remoteness from administrative centres thins the record of the past still further. Perhaps a contrast is required here, a consideration of an opposite: the most intensely-recorded society which Europe has ever seen is probably that of the United Provinces of the Netherlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Here almost every kind of record of a densely-populated, predominantly urban society survives to the extent that it is possible to walk in imagination over the brick paving of long-demolished streets, to pass known shops with their vegetables, round cheeses and cuts of meat, to glance into the chess board floored hallways of houses, at the blue and white dish on the table, the broom propped in the doorway. Early-modern Holland is not only recorded in innumerable paintings of daily life, sometimes of the most miniscule and evanescent details of daily life, but also in meticulously-detailed plans of estates and gardens, in town plans and bird's-eye views rendered in scarcely-credible, loving detail, so much so that the piles of timber stacked on the outer quay at Middelburg one day in the 1630s are visible on the great engraving of the town seen from above, as is the precise layout of the merchant's garden three streets away.

“This is a condition of engagement with the reticent north. The kind of historical record which may be abundant elsewhere, the lavish recording of details of daily life, are absent.”

The documentation is particularly rich to match the unparalleled visual record: inventories of the contents of almost all houses seem to have been taken as part of the process of registering a death and processing a will, so that it is possible to know the exact nature and value of a given house in a given street in different decades of the past. And the whole society seems in retrospect like a society of writers, engravers and printers—so much do maps, views, and topographies pour from the presses of the low countries—so great is the volume of writing which reflects, affectionately or satirically, the back-chat of the market, the conversation in the doctor’s parlour or the council chamber of the town.

It was perhaps a coincidence that a society and period which specialised in publication, especially the publication of fine engravings and maps, should have been a society sufficiently proud and self-aware to consider, almost for the first time in European history, that its daily activities were worth recording for themselves. It was a society which had come a long way in a short time, partly through a remarkable level of shared purpose, partly through the compressing and forcing effects of being, in one sense or another, under siege from absolutist neighbours throughout its short history. It was a society which exported fine books, paintings, painters and technicians to neighbouring German and British states. It was a society obsessed with houses and things in houses. No wonder that we know more about what it looked like than we know about almost any age before or since. It was the society which (it would seem) gave Europe the words *landscape* and *townscape.*

Much as we would like it to be otherwise, this impulse to record almost everything, to preserve the lives of ordinary people for the contemplation of the far future, was not felt particularly widely until relatively recently. Famously, Samuel Pepys, the London diarist writes a momentary letter to posterity and his future self when he records that the night watchman voiced his cry under the window, 'just as I set down these words.' Such moments of contact are rare. The unpublished, vast journal of the mid-seventeenth century Highland traveller and scholar James Fraser, constantly eludes the modern reader: very occasionally he will give a personal impression of a room, a garden, a city. A very few times he will jot down a fragment of conversation, a boatman's cry, the words of a lampoon fixed to a door. Usually, however he has no sense of place or feeling for place in a modern sense: he is interested in measurements and statistics, in the kinds of stories that tourist guides tell now and (we learn from Fraser's journal) told then.

"Tombstones occupy a very precise place in the visual culture of Scotland… the one form in which a degree of personal and visual expression becomes possible."

Perhaps the first dawning in Britain of a sense of place in a modern sense, the record of landscape and weather as anything but an agricultural phenomenon is found in another unpublished work: the biographer and antiquarian John Aubrey's amateur watercolours of his family's house at Easton Pierce in Wiltshire, watercolours which are partly the records of fantasy projects for the improvement of house and gardens, but which change, as Aubrey's fortunes declined and his inheritance had to be sold, into a series of elegiac depictions of springs in shaded groves, of the corners of fields, all suffused with a kind of retrospective regret and melancholy—a kind of silent autobiography told through unpolished likenesses of places.

Moving now specifically to the question of visual and written records of the north of Scotland, we encounter all the problems which are specific to the north. There is no use in trying to avoid the sobering thought that a destructive and iconophobic protestant society will have willingly obliterated most of the visual record which may have existed from before the end of the sixteenth century. It is only in Episcopalian and, to an extent, Catholic Aberdeenshire that a few, a very few portraits, textiles and illuminated manuscripts survived that catastrophic century. Thereafter remoteness and the composition of society govern the making and survival of works of visual art, ensuring, for example, that there are very few portraits of such elite individuals who might have been able to afford one of the Aberdeen dynasty of portraitists, the Alexanders. So the visual record, as for so much of rural Scotland, unless it happened that a picturesque traveller made a watercolour, or a commercial lithographer a print, really comes down to marks on the landscape, to that which can be excavated, to the built heritage and to tombstones. Tombstones occupy a very precise place in the visual culture of Scotland: sanctioned by the absoluteness of death, they are the one form in which a degree of personal and visual expression becomes possible. All the creativity, all the inherent ability for design which could otherwise only express itself in masonry and domestic utensils, all found an outlet in the tombstone, as did a very considerable degree of literary feeling and skill.

The written record of remote communities — except in the very rare cases of a Minister who kept a journal — is either external, or the result of something going wrong. Of course there are glorious exceptions from the nineteenth century, like the self-taught scholar and writer Hugh Millar of Cromarty, there were in all probability field preachers of apocalyptic eloquence in the Covenanting period, but their words have gone on the wind. Unless an individual from a remote community made their way through what was at times a remarkably open educational system and then wrote a memoir of youth from the leisure of a lettered, professional middle age, there is unlikely to be much life-writing as such. Of course there are records of landholdings, of taxes paid, occasionally of levies for service; there are the sombre lists of emigrants. There is the Great Military Map drawn up after the rising of 1745, but that tends to focus on the big houses, on lands which might be forfeit, and the villages and settlements are no more than a series of dots on the contour-lines. There are the mute testimonies of unreal estate plans, plans which assume in retrospect an aspect of dark fantasy, which presume a landscape as empty as any desert or icefield.

Of course there are records of prosecutions — there are the sparse, rare, precious glimpses of the common speech of Scots which can be found in *Pitcairn's Criminal Trials* — but, as has been the case in rural Europe since the middle ages, an individual can pass almost unrecorded through life and the surviving record, coming into visibility only if they step outside the norms (accepted or enforced) of the society in which they lived their days.

So after all this, what remains? The ridge and furrow on the hill, stone buildings and stony sites of buildings, a little remembered music, grave markers. The light, the hill, the songs and the stones.

“An individual can pass almost unrecorded through life and the surviving record, coming into visibility only if they step outside the norms of the society in which they lived their days.”

Round Table: Document People

"Prehistory makes me immensely uncomfortable … there is so much uncertainty. When we start describing this space as being a house, or a tomb … We're applying a huge interpretation which I think is possibly almost always wrong. A lot of the time we're looking at these outlines of buildings and we're trying to recreate, trying to sort of re-imagine, or rebuild something."

Keir Strickland (second from left),
Round Table Discussion
Document People,
2'21"–3'08"

MEDIEVAL NORDIC SOURCES A SHORT ARTISTS' GUIDE

by Lisa Collinson,
University of Aberdeen

In autumn 2014, I ran a series of three events, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, called 'Artists, Academics and Ancient Texts Performance Workshops'. My co-organizer was performance artist Ruth Barker, and the sessions, and associated performances, were hosted by the Centre for Contemporary Arts (Glasgow) and Seventeen (an Aberdeen arts hub). In these workshops, artists and academics from various arts and humanities backgrounds worked together to explore how ancient texts — specifically, medieval Nordic texts — could be used as starting-points for the creation of original performances in gallery spaces.

To our surprise, we found that medievalists and artists had far more in common in terms of research interests and working methods than we had originally anticipated. This has prompted me to offer here a very short introduction to some of the ways in which I think medieval Nordic sources could be of interest to contemporary artists of all kinds.

Visual Art

Visual artists who prefer plain lines and shy away from typical Viking art, with its intricate loops and animal heads, might like to to turn their attention to the small gold foil works called *guldgubbar* ('gold men') which are slightly earlier in date and have been found across mainland Scandinavia, for example at a pre-Christian cult building at Uppåkra, Sweden. Their function remains mysterious — and that is part of their attraction.

Written Sources

Otherwise, there's plenty of juicy stuff in written sources. Against all the odds, lots of fascinating literature survives from (roughly) thirteenth-century Iceland and Norway, in particular. Exact dating and placing are tricky, of course, but specialists continue to believe that some of the darkest, knottiest matter is several hundred years older. In the right hands, this material — a fiendishly complex genre known as 'skaldic verse' — can be terrifically powerful...if often seriously violent. What's more, after years languishing in a deeply dated edition, skaldic verse has recently been treated to a couple of decades of scholarly intensive care and brand new editions and translations can be found in a monumental new series, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages. For inspiration, have a look at the work of Ian Crockatt who was already recognized as an accomplished poet before completing a PhD on translating skaldic verse, and whose muscular work goes from strength to strength.

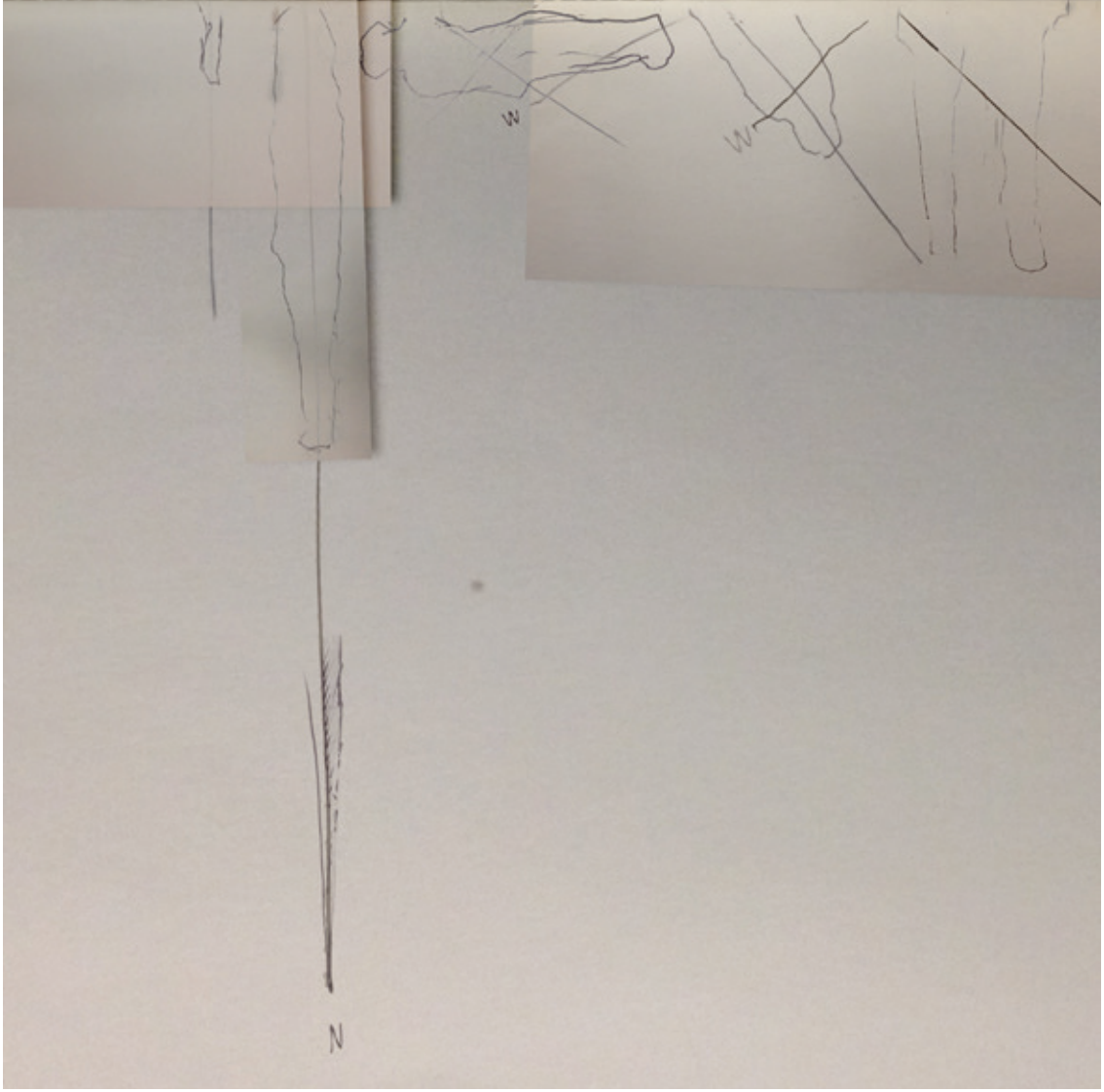
“The best guide to a new field, though, will always be conversation with a living, present human being.”

Two more related areas which have seen dramatic upsurges of interest over the past five or ten years are history of religion and mythology – indeed, these are probably two of the most fertile fields of research into the Nordic Middle Ages at the present moment. Investigation of figures outwith the circle of better-known gods has yielded intriguing results (I'm thinking of Karen Bek-Pedersen on the norns, for instance), but enquiry into Thor, Odin and giants continues apace, too. Many of the scholars engaged in this work are at the early-career stage and may well welcome contact from artists seeking advice. For those who wish to dive straight into primary sources themselves, the standard starting-point is an Icelandic text called *Snorra Edda,* but a fantastic alternative is the Danish Latin Gesta Danorum: an absolute treasure trove of bizarre legendary tales about which a great deal remains to be elucidated. (Left-field perspectives from outside medieval studies might be just what's needed!)

Another expanding field which might appeal to artists curious about deviance, justice and punishment in the past is legal history. Following stimulation from the Leverhulme Trust-funded Medieval Nordic Laws Project, on which I worked, the oldest full-scale written laws from the region are now in the process of being translated (most for the first time ever) into English, so keep an eye out for these over the next few years if you're looking to work with topics like witchcraft, murder, or violence against (or perpetrated by) women.

Finally, I hope it will be helpful to mention an excellent resource for both targeted research and browsing for inspiration: Inger M Boberg, *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature,* Bibliotheca Arnamagnæana 27 (Copenhagen, 1966). This is not an easily available text, but copies can be found in some university libraries and should prove very much worth the search. A random flick through the pages is likely to uncover motifs such as 'dog buried inside of foster son', 'witch burned by furrows drawn round her home', and 'persons whose heads are stone-hammers'.

The best guide to a new field, though, will always be conversation with a living, present human being – which is exactly what makes events like the True North Conference so important. Don't hesitate to seek out such contact if you think it could be useful – most scholars will be very happy to help if they can.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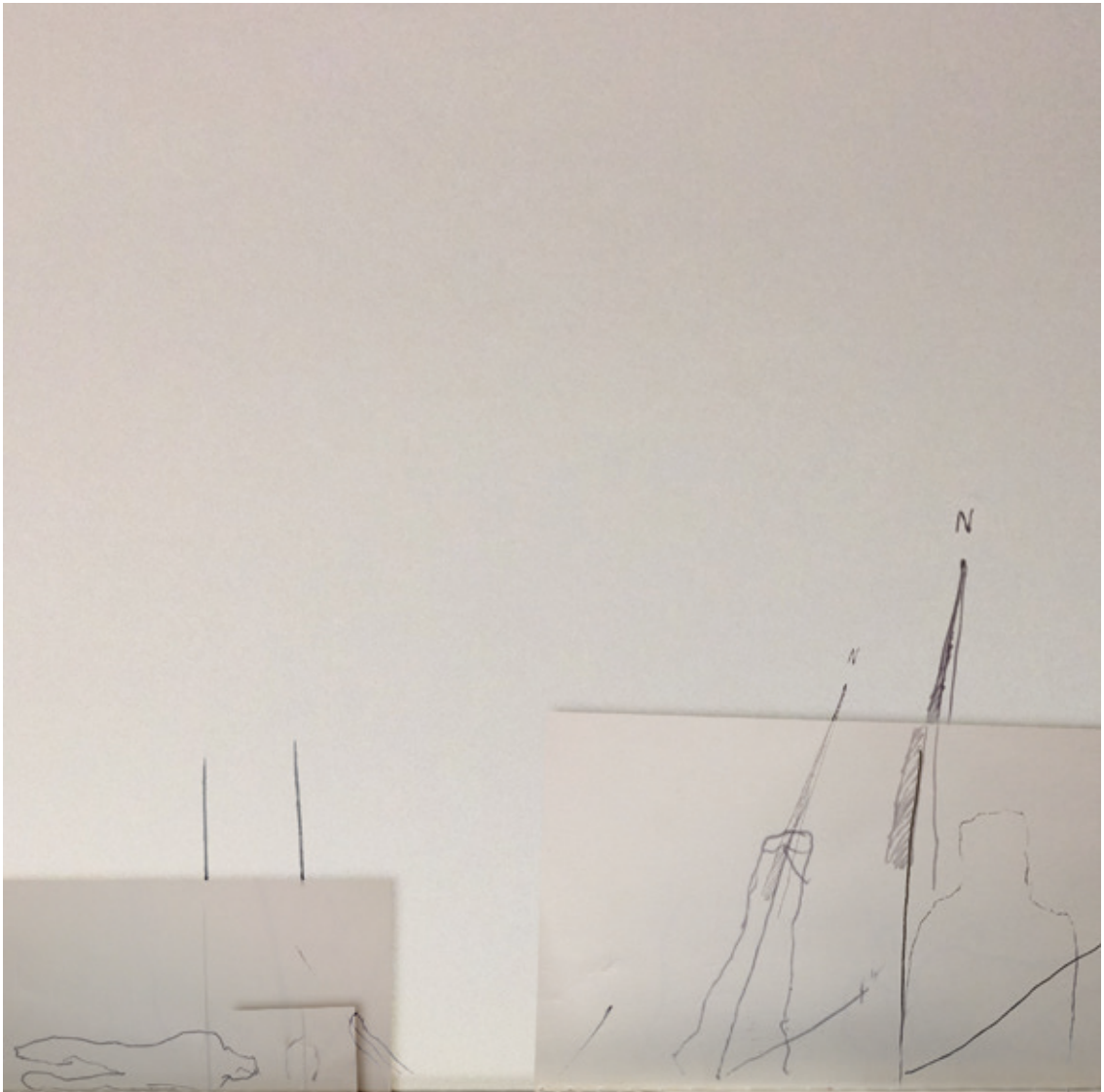
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“I have created a collage drawing that might, I hope, invite the viewer to move the publication around, fold it along its spine, find different perspectives to view the elements within. It comes from thinking about the sense of ‘North’ within the body and where that is for us. It might inspire similar thoughts or questions. I intend to give the viewer/reader/browser something to do with themselves and the planes of the paper in relation to their facing of it, different placements. Articulation of the spine-fold of the publication helps with this and there would be some opportunity to force perspective changes by moving the two halves of the publication.”

Robbie Synge,
A Sense of North: A Choreography,
2016

FUTURE HORIZONS

by Sue Reid Sexton

This work of fiction is for all the people I met on the Lateral North mini tour. Coincidences of names are unintentional.

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In the peninsula of South Norsay we like to keep track of our wildest dreams. Most of us agree the future is always fiction until we make it real. The first miracle has already happened.

Isla wanted us to dig a trench at the south of the peninsula and separate us from the mainland. It was a throwaway remark. She'd had enough of centralisation.

"We're cut off anyway," she griped, "with no broadband. The world has forgotten us."

Joey said, "No, let's just move to a real island, en masse, the whole lot of us."

But all the islands had owners or occupants or both.

Rosie and Dilys came back from down south and told us in Applecross they bounce the internet off Raasay and Skye and into each other's living rooms. "It's like their whole peninsula is lit up with life. Dot is doing design work again for a Glasgow company. Mel is writing tunes for STV. Penny is doing business with a company in London."

Here in South Norsay we'd already tried bouncing the internet from our most prominent points. None of them had worked.

"So let's build ourselves an island," said Isla, always ready with a pick. So we did, we built ourselves an island.

Ok, technically it's not an island. It's a platform floating above the seabed, attached thereto by a massive chain. It doubles as a wave power generator too so, along with our various solar panels and wind turbines, we can heat ourselves in winter and sell enough excess electricity to the south, which funds the island's upkeep. We also do trips for techie tourists from other parts of the world who want to replicate it. Tom met his wife Michiko that way while she was visiting from Japan. Her whole family want to move here now.

The island is far enough out to sea for us to bounce a signal up from Raasay, and we wrote long persuasive letters to Orkney and Lewis, which are closer, and they set up communication masts too. The wind takes them down occasionally but usually one of them works.

Because of the island we are connected to the whole world. Robert is coordinating a project in Ecuador and now visits there regularly. The moment we heard the council in Inverness had decided to put a high security prison here, we emailed and emailed and phoned and emailed and wrote and harassed the life out of them until they withdrew the idea. There was some dissent in the peninsula because of the possibilities for employment, but most people have other jobs now instead. Isla said they could build it if we got to dig a trench round it, but I'm afraid that wouldn't have been necessary. The long cold winters would have sorted out any criminally minded person and no-one wants to leave during our beautiful summers.

Sadly, Ian finally found a girlfriend on a dating site and went away to Edinburgh, but Angus met his beloved Rachelle on an online plumbing course so all our pipes work again and we can all say *"coulez le robinet"* when we want a drink of water. And we don't have to wait six weeks for Old MacGregor to come. Incidentally, MacGregor's now running an online plumbing courses for history classes in Manchester. That's how old our plumbing was!

There's a giant light on top of the island to warn off vessels and a little kitchen with emergency food supplies for ships in distress. And of course an internet signal for emailing for rescue. Stella goes out there a lot for peace and manages our web-hub while she's there.

This is the best thing of all. I can't begin to tell you. We call it The Forecast. It's for all our future news.

At the beginning, before we'd all got the hang of the internet, Stella asked us, for a laugh, for our views on Isla's trench, Joey's idea of whole community migration, and the high security prison malarkey. Some of the responses were hysterical. She made The Forecast website for us and called an urgent meeting to teach us how to use it. She set up separate discussion areas on the website for each new idea and soon these daft imaginings of our future spiralled out into more future ideas in different parts of the web-hub. It's a web of ideas within the web, a hub for meeting and sharing our dreams and visions of the future when the weather's too bad to get to the community centre. The division between good sense and imagination is a blur.

People began to ask other questions. We looked at the past.

"How did we get into this fine mess?" we said. "We're imprisoned here by habit and the law."

But soon the disadvantages of hindsight gave way to questions of the future, what we wanted and how we saw it. We were shy at first, and confused. Wouldn't the future just happen? There seemed little point in even thinking about it and we were too busy working in seasonal, temporary, part-time jobs. There was no time to dream. Our dreams were embarrassing. We didn't want our neighbours to know how silly we were, that we hadn't really grown up and still dreamt of being train drivers or astronauts, or of houses with roses round the door, of highly paid jobs with enough hours for leisure and no commute, of wind-resistant greenhouses full of organic veg, and happy relationships with all members of our community.

There was a short bout of old scores resurfacing. One person stole another's husband, someone else knew who'd pinched the beer at the party that shouldn't have happened, another who started the party, and who left the bag of rubbish by the road that burst and blew the length of the peninsula. Accusations blew a chill wind which benefitted no-one. So, until we could all develop some online manners and before anyone should discover who was voting for or against taking a group of Syrian refugees, or the proposed new supermarket, Stella turned off *The Forecast.*

For a full twenty-eight hours *The Forecast* was fronted by an old-fashioned TV test card with a picture of our floating island at its centre. The blackout happened to coincide with one of the worst storms in centuries, as we learnt later on the Met Office's website. We assumed our technology had failed us. A familiar cloud of despondency joined the tempest. Technologically, 'twas ever thus.

To make matters worse, Paul had asked Juana in Mexico to marry him and, frantic for an answer and not realising the connection was lost (because his inner storm was so profound) he stood on a cliff edge assuming her answer was an unspoken 'no'. Lisa, aged ten, found him there when she was out counting the sheep to make sure none had blown away. This was the same Lisa who had seen Paul and Juana giggling behind the community centre, snogging and promising to love each other forever.

"She's already promised you," said pragmatic Lisa. "Can I be the bridesmaid?"

Paul said maybe having Lisa as a bridesmaid might persuade Juana to marry him in the first place. He went into detail about the wedding, the house they were going to live in behind the tree behind the community centre and how many children they'd have, and how he would work on the boats and learn the technology of the internet and Juana would weave the colourful rugs of her Mexican ancestors and entwine her techniques with Scottish tartan.

Lisa, who had immediately grasped the skills and possibilities of her peninsula's new technology, had a good eye for an opportunity. She offered Paul a Facebook lesson in exchange for the position of maid of honour, then went on to recount her future transport business which would take her future children to secondary school on a daily basis by ferry instead of having to go all week, like her big brother did. She'd run it until local businesses and the resultant population had grown sufficiently in the area to warrant having their own secondary school.

"Then we can bring in kids from round about," said Lisa, "and take them home on my ferry." Then she'd open a sweetshop. 'Selling only sweets, nothing else, all year round.'

Paul and Lisa fought their way back to the community centre against the storm where Joey, Isla, Angus, Rachelle, Dilys, Rosie and Robert were warming themselves in the kitchen. The unnameable cheat, thief and litterbug were not there, but Dave, Davie and Hamish were hanging out in the meeting room with a tourist from Nova Scotia and a bottle of Horizon, Hamish's new whisky label, first vat. I arrived soon after and joined the crowd in the kitchen.

We were concerned for Stella's safety, out there on the island doing stellar work on the internet. We worried the storm had cut the island loose and we'd find her in the North Atlantic Garbage Patch eating contaminated fish caught with the emergency fishing rod. We envisioned the whole thing amidst much hilarity, until a solemn quiet fell over us that this might actually be the case. We stared into our mugs of tea and munched on Blue Ribands.

"We should call out the rescue team," said Robert and went to the office.

"I'm going to have a lifeboat when I grow up," said Lisa beneath knotted brows. Stella is her favourite auntie.

"I'm going to invent better communication technology which doesn't risk lives," said Dilys.

"I'm going to dig a hole and cover it with glass so I can grow tomatoes, peppers and bananas," said Isla.

We waited for Robert to come back with news.

Talk got serious.

"What if we all spent one day a week, those of us who're able, digging the stone for a better road so we can commute further for jobs?" asked Dave when he came for water for the whisky. "Build the thing ourselves."

"Great idea," said Isla.

"How much water are you putting in that whisky?" demanded Joey, ignoring the question.

"Only a smidgeon," said Davie. "It's fine stuff."

"What if we made a new whisky cordial with its own special mixer, otherwise known as local water?" said Rosie.

"I know a man who could help with that," said Dilys.

"What, with the drinking of it?" I said, and we all sniggered at Davie.

Then Robert came back with an email from Stella.

> *Bit choppy out here, haha, but all well. Thanks for asking. Plastic emergency meat is better than expected. Tell Lisa I saw an albatross. Please check web-hub.*
> *Stella*

We all squeezed into the office and leant on each other's shoulders, peering at the screen. The test card with the island was still there, but on top of the island's cabin was a giant smiling Stella in the lotus position.

A speech bubble said "Be nice."

Another bubble said "Tread softly because we tread on our own dreams."

And in a third "Tell Paul to read his emails."

Paul turned a funny colour and hurried us out. We went to the meeting room to celebrate with some Horizon and discuss the Home Scheme, our plan to build sheltered cottages for our elderly. It would be in the castle grounds, not far from the health centre which, if Lisa gets her way, will need a full-time doctor. There would be a nursery there too so young and old can play together, and we'd bring back MacGregor's wife from the home in Inverness. The cottages could be used for tourists when not needed. The MacGregors could be our first residents, in the cottage with the best sea views so he can watch the island light for us in case it goes out.

Meanwhile, Lisa sneaked back down the corridor and heard Paul gasp. There was a long pause, she told us later, before the shout.

"Yes!"

He ran out the front door and round the building three times before coming in for some Horizon.

'Told you,' said Lisa.

FROM CAR SHOWROOM TO CASINO
A MIDLOTHIAN SITE OF HISTORY

by Nicky Bird

Car Showroom on
a smart phone, 2015
Nicky Bird

Newspaper cutting,
Nivensknowe Miners
Social Welfare Club,
The Scotsman, 1958.
–
Thanks to Midlothian
Local Studies and
Archive Service,
and The Scotsman

I want to take us to a location that is six miles south of Edinburgh, not far from the Pentland Hills and in the region of Midlothian. The name of Roslin might spring to mind, with its familiar connections to Dolly the Sheep and Rosslyn Chapel. We are already then into 'history' whether this is the more recent past or further back to the 15th century.

Roslin, however, is not our destination. We will stop at a point where Niven's Knowe Road meets the A701. On the corner is the car showroom Alex F Noble and Son, once the site of the Nivensknowe Miners Social Welfare Club remembered locally as the 'Casino'. Designed by the Architects T Bowhill Gibson & Laing and opened in 1958, newspaper articles and beautifully composed architectural photographs evidence the club's confident modernism. Some material aspects of the car showroom are uncannily resonant, such as the large glass frontage, but other aspects of the club are harder to envisage: an open air terrace, its cocktail lounge bar with a mural by sculptor Norman Forrest, and a deep swimming pool. Press reports of the day describe the club as 'without parallel in the country' and 'a bold social experiment' for the Coal Board's 15,000 employees (The Scotsman, 2 August, 1958). Yet by 1961, The Glasgow Herald reported that it had become "something of a 'white elephant', miners apparently preferring their more modest local institutes and clubs" (The Glasgow Herald, 24 January 1961). It burnt down later in the 1960s. In between the Casino's opening and demise, it was the place in which Miss Anne Grant is crowned Lothians Coal Queen, a 14-year-old has a brief spell as a lifeguard and a young man begins his career as an entertainer the night the Casino burns down.

So we are looking at a Nissan car showroom, and a history that has barely a visible trace in the landscape. We have had to look elsewhere for tangible evidence, piecing together fragments from both online national and local archival sources. These are photographs, newspaper cuttings, maps and personal blogs. However, the motivation for this detective work in the first place has been triggered by a local voice. This voice comes from the village of Bilston, just a little further down the A701. That's our next stop.

Bilston may appear, to some, plain in character, with its identity as a Scottish mining village not immediately apparent to the casual eye: the monument to its mining history is not visible from the main road. Bilston Glen Colliery, situated opposite the Casino, closed in 1989. To those of a certain age, Bilston is remembered as a 'flashpoint' of mass picketing, recollected again in the 2014 media coverage commemorating the thirty-year anniversary of Britain's notorious Miners' strike.

Untitled,
Bilston, 2014
Nicky Bird

Police and miners
at Bilston Glen, 1985
Photographer:
Denis Straughan

Let's continue to walk through the village to the primary school, and meet our first local source: not a former miner but a woman with two young children, who has lived here all her life. The Casino's young lifeguard is her father, and the entertainer is one of her neighbours. The Casino is part of their history, not directly hers. Yet she is the one that is relaying this piece of history to us. The Casino has a kind of mythic quality. In part, this is because the colloquial name for the welfare club conjures up glamorous images of Las Vegas that may seem at odds with the current location. It is also the effect of cross-generational family storytelling. Patrick Keiller has remarked that 'every landscape has its myth and every myth has its history' (Keiller, 2013, p 30). The Casino seems a compelling starting point for reconstructing a hidden history.

Now on to meet the witnesses, accompanied by the young woman and the community education worker. As trusted points of contact, both in different ways open doors. Photographs and newspaper cuttings can operate in similar ways too – prompting conversation, recognition and reminiscence. These are the people, artefacts and actions needed to build a picture of history.

The woman's uncle, a former miner, meets us at the surviving Bilston Miners Welfare Club. It is perhaps an example of the 'more modest' local clubs The Glasgow Herald referred to earlier. He tells us, not without irony, that while his father sunk the pit in the beginning of its life (1952), he filled it in at the end (1989). The man speaks vividly to a press photograph taken in the location we are sitting in. It is of a group of Bilston Miners dressed as cowboys. This is not because he recognizes any individual but for fond memories of 'shoot outs' where the club would become thick with smoke and an overwhelming smell of gunpowder.

The uncle looks over the photographs of the Casino: what would he say to taking a walk round the present day site to explain where things used to be? "There's nae point."

The entertainer is at home. He points to the upper part of the photograph of the Casino. On the far left, top floor: that's where he was singing in a small piece jazz band, and this helped start his career. Later that night the Casino burnt down. He never went into the right side of the Casino, the area where the dance hall was. He expands on his professional life, playing at other miners' social clubs and how all the big acts, popular 1960s bands such as The Bachelors, would tour these venues – that's how important the clubs were. Now he is an Internet DJ on local radio, and has made a compilation CD of his music for us to take away.

At Bilston Parish Church, an activities group for older people is waiting for us, seated at their tables with tea and biscuits. The community education worker is hoping that they have brought along their own family photographs. None of them has. Perhaps detecting disappointment, someone in the group explains that not many people had cameras in those days, they just didn't have the money, and that photographs were taken only at special occasions.

They look over the Casino photographs and the group is talking to—and over—each other. The mural is remembered and given a name; a woman's childhood memory of the swimming pool is that she didn't like it—too deep and didn't feel safe.

Miss Anne Grant—Lothians Coal Queen chosen at a dance in the Nivensknowe Miners Welfare Centre. Unidentified photographer

Leaving the church, we walk down the street in the direction of the A701. The young woman invites us to stop off at her home. There are some things she wants to show us before we leave Bilston. Her mother had a relative who was keen on making cine films, which have recently been transferred to a DVD. They haven't watched the DVD fully, and our looking for evidence of the Casino gives them an excuse to sit down and discover what has been recorded. The films are unedited, of variable technical quality, but that doesn't matter. They are snippets of holidays, family gatherings, gala days, wedding parties on church steps, and relaxed, everyday moments – older relatives playing with dogs, a young couple pushing a pram, and finally children playing. Here the young woman finds her toddler self. The footage builds a portrait of Bilston's recent past through a specific family mostly at play. The world of work is absent. The films are silent, but the viewing experience isn't: there is a running commentary on who's who, affectionate laughter at fashions and so on.

Change is in the air, and the looking back at the past prompts discussion about a new 'first class' primary school being built soon and to replace the school that was our starting point (Edinburgh Evening News, 19 September 2014). In common with many other small mining towns and villages in Midlothian, Bilston is becoming surrounded by new private housing estates. We walked past this estate at the beginning – the one called Cameron Gardens set way back from the road. When you go back, says the community education worker, take a look at the wall between the 'old' Bilston and 'new' Bilston – see what you make of that! The naming of new estates and the subtle construction of borders between communities evidently matter. The new school, and future demolition of the old one, reminds the young woman that she has something for us: photocopies of school group photographs from the 1980s and 1990s. The old school and the new school are clearly on her mind, perhaps because her own history, and her children's are directly connected to these. I could collect copies of school group photos, display them in the old school and record people's stories, she says. Then, suggests the Community worker, we can make a booklet to go along with these for the new school. This is the history the young woman really wants to 'write'. The Casino has slipped away.

Opposite: Bilston Miners' cowboy night, 1979. Photographer: Bill Stout

It is time to go. As we head back up north, let's look at what we have got. There are more fragments to add to what we have brought to Bilston. These are oral stories told in conversation, through references to music, amateur cine film and the vernacular school group photograph. Interestingly, these are overwhelming visual and aural rather than textual. Nevertheless a form of 'writing history' is going on here. The Casino has an uncertain place within this. We can't escape the significance of the uncle's 'nae point'. He closed the door on guiding us further, while others populated parts of archival press photographs with personal meaning.

Is the Casino a strong enough example of what Annette Kuhn has described as a "community held story of visual and auditory currency" (Kuhn, 2002, p128) from which we can confidently proceed? As an artist used to observing how people construct their narrative about *place,* I admit "perhaps not."

The Casino, however, has taken us on a tour of Bilston that has held promise and disappointment. Both are inevitable parts of writing history and making 'social engaged' art. We can detect why some histories may be written, while others are not. The Casino also shows how one line of enquiry leads to another.

Looking at the photographs of the car showroom, the Casino, the Lothians Coalfield Queen, and Gunslingers, we can see Annette Kuhn's observation on how an approach to particular photographs 'opens up readings that at least begin to unpack the intersections and continuities between the personal, the familial and the social that lie embedded in the image's many layers of meaning' (Kuhn, 2007, p 290). The same could be said of history. We haven't been on a wasted journey.

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Background note:
The photo-essay is a creative response to a series of visits to Bilston made between 2013–2015. These exploratory visits were part of *Peripheral Visions: Photography & Placemaking at Scotland's Rural Edge,* a photography project currently in development. This project is bringing together the themes of land, photography and other interdisciplinary practices to enable dialogue about pasts and futures related to Scotland's 'fragile' rural communities. Some communities lie on the edges of cities, while others may be considered 'remote'. Both 'fragility' and 'remote' are contested terms implying social and economic vulnerability on the one side, while on the other, evokes more aesthetic connotations – such as delicate beauty or balance. *Peripheral Visions* will be shown at Streetlevel, Glasgow in 2017.

List of resources / sources for this writing of history (in order of appearance in the essay)

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Round Table: Mini Residencies

"Borrowing past versions of a future aesthetic as a kind of shorthand to talk about (how) things will affect us in the future."

Hannah Imlach,
Round Table:
Mini Residences,
18'45" – 18'52"

MODES OF SELF-PRESENTATION IN THE NORTH PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

by Matt Sillars,
University of the
Highlands and Islands

The way a people are photographed, or make photographs of themselves, is an act of engagement with taste. Bourdieu (1965) points out that 'barbarous taste' is never entirely free of all reference to 'good taste'. There is a hierarchy of legitimate taste where the dominant position of the 'establishment' and its practices in art, music, literature and theatre set the tone and the style for the lower forms of expression. He places photography below these classical forms but above the likes of cooking, furniture decorating and cosmetics. Bourdieu was writing at a point in history where image making took a vernacular turn, moving, he argues, from the highbrow to the middlebrow. The explosion in the mobile phone selfie, the most common of all forms of self-portraiture and self-representation, would no doubt see the form slip below furniture painting and to new depths.

Photographs have come to dominate the 20th and 21st century. The social practices of family photography, the 'Home Mode' of representation (Chalfen, 1987), are embedded culturally through the passing of 'snaps' around the table, or the sharing of 'snaps' on social media. Grandparents trawl through shoe boxes of family photographs with grandchildren and graduation photographs adorn the walls of the living rooms of proud parents. The way the everyday and the special are captured and re-presented is an important part of life, and visual culture is a key element in the development and maintenance of society.

The Victorians: Re-presenting the North

A photographic 'snap' can be a culturally dense social document, packed with signification and narrative, making the invisible elements of our social lives starkly visible, and at the same time can be a superficial record of one moment, made on a whim, shared briefly and then looked upon occasionally at odd future moments, if at all. Through it we perform identity, replay events and relationships, reviewing that single point in time through a new lens, one which reflects our lived experience since the photograph was made and which is ever changing as we are ever changing. Photographs are a conundrum. They purport to show things as they really are, but as with all historical documents, they are slippery and their meaning is not fixed but constantly being negotiated.

Since its inception towards the end of the industrial revolution, the photograph has become an integral part of the way people say "this is who I am." The purported first ever selfie by Robert Cornelius in 1839 took an age to make, yet shares elements of today's selfies, a sense of not being quite sure where to look, a self-aware and engaged pose and a feeling of the instantaneous. Yet, for all its directness, photography is fraught with ambiguity. It is understood by 'all and sundry' to be a medium which can be manipulated and which should not be trusted, yet at the same time 'all and sundry' accept their own snaps as social truths.

The North?

The 'North' in a Scottish context is a difficult territory to define. The boundaries of the North are contested spaces – particularly on its eastern and southern fringes. The far north of mainland Scotland and the Islands of Orkney and Shetland are often missed out in discussion which may focus on the West or the central Highlands. Regardless, the North exists without difficulty in the imagination and plays host to powerful mythologies such as the land of the noble savage, whose image has come to represent the whole of Scotland, and as an exotic wilderness where language and customs create a sense of *Other* and of course, a place closer to nature. The 'North' and the 'West' are privileged in the romantic imagining of place. The romantic North is, of course, not singularly the West. James Valentine photographed Castle Sinclair and Castle Girnigoe near Wick in 1891 and Washington Wilson photographed the inhabitants of St Kilda in 1885, demonstrating a commitment outwith the narrow focus of the central Highlands and the immediate west coast.

"The boundaries of the North are contested spaces – particularly on its eastern and southern fringes."

Valentine and Wilson were at the forefront of tourist postcard photography and they capitalized on the growing wealth and prosperity of 19th century Britain. Their postcards introduced the new tourists to the North through their photographs of the remote and the picturesque such as Glen Coe. Tom Normand writes in his history of Scottish photography

> *"The new class of leisured consumer, anxious to experience the scenic pleasures of the Highland wilderness, journey from the industrial and commercial centres to the 'untamed' lands already celebrated in academic landscape paintings. A flight from the urban centre to the marginal wilderness was only complete when a souvenirmarked the journey. Given the confluence of new technologies it was inevitable that this marker would be the photograph."*
> *(2007:59)*

The 'marginal wilderness' was exciting and exotic, made recognisable and rendered safe by informing the tourist of what was to be found in the landscape and fulfilling their expectations of it. The 'tourist mode of representation' was a highly stylised discourse of the North—the compositions are pictorial with emphasis on grandeur and scale in scenery, rarely showing people, emphasising instead nature and wilderness.

Wilson was a Moray photographer with printing facilities on a semi-industrial scale in Aberdeen and is noted for his landscapes. He is also intimately connected with portraying Queen Victoria at Balmoral. His seminal image of the Queen on horseback, with John Brown holding the reins, is the result of his exclusive position as photographer to the Queen at Balmoral and is justly famous as a key representation of the Queen in mourning and of her physical connection to Balmoral and the Highlands. Although Balmoral lies well outwith the Highland Line and any sense of the far geographical North, it is implicitly part of that imagined northern Scottish landscape. This image and others are reported to have sold over 13,000 copies (Stevenson and Forbes, 2001:72). This is testament to the popularity and the high demand for photographic cards at the end of the 19th Century.

The Carte de Visite – an Early Fad

As the 19th century turned into the 20th century then so began the great 'democratising' of photography. The late 1800s had seen an explosion of photography and all across the globe there could be found small photographic businesses. These specialised in providing affordable portraiture in the form of *carte de visite,* small portraits used as visiting cards, traded and collected. This became an international fad with many millions of images being made in a variety of styles and sizes, many in humorous mode and in costume as well as the more conventional.

Among such was the family firm from Wick, the Johnstons, possibly unique in that their photographic business ran unbroken for 112 years from 1863–1975. Theirs is a tremendous archive – a cultural account. That the work of this family is available online for all to view and search is a great achievement by the Wick Society and the dedicated people involved in scanning and archiving.

> *"Between 1870 and the outbreak of the Great War, the firm was to take about 60,000 portraits of individuals, families, friends, workmates, and weddings" (The Johnston Collection, 2015)*

Self-representation in the archive follows a familiar pattern with many images of seated and well-dressed individuals and couples. The importance of props is apparent in the studio photographs which juxtapose the figures with elegant tables or chairs and painted backdrops. There is even a fascinating studio image of a young man on a velocipede. An image entitled *A Portrait of Kilted Man in Woodland Scene* serves to illustrate the more stereotypical view of photography from that period – identity framed in a kitsch version of nationhood. However, this is not typical. What we do see are images of well-dressed respectable and modern people of the time. There is a keen eye for fashion and style and an acute awareness that the photograph is a document of self-expression and one through which a person will be judged by peers and family alike. This perception of a 'contemporary mode' of representation shows a developed sense of what an image is and what it is capable of. When browsing the online archive we are made very aware of a refreshing 'savvy' about the role of visual culture which is demonstrated by the sitters.

The 20th Century and the Rise of the 'Home Mode'

The Kodak boom from 1900 to the middle of the century, enabled more ordinary people to own a camera and to make their own images. Chalfen, an American anthropologist, points to this as the 'home mode' of representation where the snapshot supersedes the studio photograph as the key social document.

The Canadian sociologist, Erving Goffman (1990), argues that representation can be thought of in terms of a theatrical model—'life is a stage'. This dramaturgical approach uses scripts and front and back stage personas. The front stage persona is the idealised self which is presented to others—the audience. The micro adjustments to pose and poise made by people being photographed comes from a deep understanding of the conventions of photography. However, although materials were cheaper, they were not cheap. Neither were they instant—they needed to be taken to a shop for processing. This meant a considerable investment in time and commitment to be even a family snapper, but as family owned cameras were mostly automatic there was little in the way of technical issues to bother the photographer—a photo would 'work' if the representation of the people being photographed was satisfactory.

The yardstick of a 'good photo' would be if it matched the front stage persona of the subject. This persona of course does not occur in isolation but within a social milieu, and the social construction of identity draws on convention. Although we may negotiate this in a fluid manner, in the first half of the 20th century image making is constrained and operates within boundaries defined by earlier photographers. The legitimate taste of the high arts is still the engine which drives the more base forms. However, as technology continues to advance and as counter culture becomes a more prominent aspect of life in the mid to late 20th century, so image making begins to change. The advent of picture based magazines such as *Life* in America and *Picture Post* in Britain in the 1950s, which act as windows to the world as well as reflecting life on our doorsteps, are crucial in the development of the vernacular as a tolerable subject for photography. These began the movement towards a photography of ordinary life.

The notion that identity is constructed and that the work of early practitioners is highly influential in the photographic practices of the 'person in the street', is critical to understanding the nature of self-representation in the modern age. The arrival of digital photography, the internet and social media in the late 20th century revolutionized the photography of the ordinary person and enabled a more direct construction of self. The mobile phone ensured that photography moved through the last barrier. The role of the parent as gatekeeper is abolished and it becomes a cultural tool for all ages and stages. The ability to share photographs today mirrors the craze for the carte de visite of the Victorian period—these are transformed into the Facebook profile picture of the 21st century.

The romanticized view of the remote and wild north is also as strong today as it was in the time of Wilson and Valentine. Flickr, Tumblr, Instagram and Facebook are virtual places of images constructed by the contributors in the 'classic mode' of representation—the 'Highlands' as Scotland, and the North as exotic and untamed. This mode may also be deemed the 'photographing photography' mode where amateur photographers replicate images they have seen and admire, and repeat and reuse the landscape within compositional conventions that demonstrate they are accomplished photographers. This repetition of images reinforces the historically dominant narrative of the North and is made by photographers both in the North and outside. Similarly, our globalised and transnational world is as prevalent in the North as elsewhere. The dominant narrative of the North as 'white' as well as able-bodied, rural, transient, poor etc. prevails, although none of this has ever been correct. The cultural archive privileges this perspective and people who are different are as hidden today as they were in the height of the Slave Trade—an aspect of Scottish northern history often mislaid. Likewise, the bogs, mountains and sea cliffs dominate the understanding of the landscape and although the Urban is there in the cultural account it is not privileged and it is made less visible when viewed through this lens. The globalization of social media follows the trend established in the *carte de visite*—it encourages a homogenisation of image and a narrowing to a social 'norm'. Therefore, we have similar images being made and the establishment of a new mode of representation—the 'social media' mode—which is expressed through a more narcissistic approach to self-representation. This is enabled by new advances in technology and the ability to take images at any moment, and to delete and re-compose ad nauseam until the ideal is expressed. The selfie is the epitome of the social media mode of homogenous representation and has become throwaway, as were many countless carte de visites.

Where Sits the North Today?

The idea of global and transnational modes of representations of self is also countered with a claim that within a global world there are also 'glocal' (the local in the global) expressions of identity. Although we have concentrated here on a range of fixed modes we can also challenge this essentialist stance and suggest that people are inherently more flexible and able to operate in more than one mode and from more than one perspective. In these terms there are no distinct subcultures or horizontal hierarchies. Instead, we can envisage a world view as a set of complex interactions. Although the representation of self in the North can be seen as operating within clear modes of representation, so too can it be seen to operate contrary to this and with it at the same time. There are social movements which are concerned with the local, and social media can connect and celebrate local differences. Perhaps the future lies in a 'glocal mode' of representation of self.

“Photographs are a conundrum. They purport to show things as they really are, but as with all historical documents, they are slippery and their meaning is not fixed but constantly being negotiated.”

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Caen – Virtual Open Worlds Group

The Virtual World of Caen presented as an equirectangular image. The historic pre-Clearance township of Caen was recreated by Timespan and the Virtual Open Worlds Group, University of St Andrews, School of Computing on a virtual modelling platform. Its development is ongoing as we write our history. Image by Dr John McCaffery

FIVE MINUTES A METHODOLOGY

by Lisa Collinson,
University of Aberdeen

Sometimes, the most important things can be said—and the strongest connections made—within just minutes; as few as three are often enough to introduce new and challenging ideas in sufficient detail to spark really stimulating conversations between complete strangers, with very little prior knowledge of each other's work or thinking. This was the premise behind a public roundtable event on *Creativity in the North* I co-organized and chaired at an experimental music festival called sonADA in Aberdeen in 2014, which I was invited to use as the model for a similar session at True North a few months later.

The sonADA event was part of a University of Aberdeen seminar series called *The Interdisciplinary North,* but had been designed to add several fresh twists to the standard academic seminar format. First, it took place at a time and place chosen to make it attractive to members of the public as well as on-campus academic staff: a Saturday, in Seventeen, an innovative arts hub just off Aberdeen's main street. Second, since we wanted to ask real questions about creativity—and get real answers—we embedded the seminar in a new experimental music festival which we felt would be likely to attract people with relevant experience, opinions and genuine hopes for the future. Third, we decided that the event should feel excitingly messy in ways which would encourage people to dive in and explore the thoughts on offer with as few inhibitions as possible. To achieve this, we invited an unusually high number of speakers to speak for just three minutes each, giving their views on creativity in the north in response to a series of prompt questions selected to give the discussion some coherence. What the speakers didn't know when they signed up was that I would enforce the three-minute rule ridiculously strictly, with a distorted electronic owl hoot from a circuit-bent toy—a surprisingly effective way to break ice and keep conversation moving briskly forwards at the same time! Finally, we asked participants and audience members to sit on floor cushions rather than chairs (although we did provide a couple of chairs, also) to melt barriers further.

One of our speakers was Timespan Director Anna Vermehren, and I was delighted when she invited me to chair a similar event at True North. This time, the subject, 'Documentation', was a little broader and presentations slightly longer (five minutes), but the range and profile of the speakers was similar (arts and humanities professionals of all kinds) and the discussion equally stimulating, ranging from the practicalities and possibilities of documenting, archiving and even reconstructing material digitally through use of imagination and traditional memorization in documentation, to pressing ethical questions. My role in enabling this was minimal—the key was the warmth, colour and generosity of the speaker and audience contributions—but I'll freely admit that my secret ingredient as chair was a somewhat unorthodox approach to ordering the speakers. I took harmonies and contrasts of subject into account, certainly, but I didn't create my final running order until I'd met as many of the speakers as possible in person—however briefly—and then allowed myself to make totally instinctive adaptations to my draft order based on what can only be described as 'hunches' about delivery style: boldness or caution, depth or height of voice, tendencies to gesture or stillness… in other words, odd as it might sound, hunches about aesthetics—not that I realized that at the time!

I was very grateful to be given permission to introduce another unusual element into a second session I was invited to chair the following day. This was a roundtable called *Document People* with four speakers (Chris Halliday, Matt Sillars, Keir Strickland, Karlyn Sutherland) whom I encouraged to ask the audience their own questions following their presentations. This technique was inspired by the Critical Response Process, developed by choreographer Liz Lerman, which had been taught to me by Elizabeth Reeder, a lecturer in English literature at the University of Glasgow, the previous autumn. Giving performers, including conference speakers, some control over discussions about their work subtly alters the dynamics of those discussions, and I would encourage readers interested in experimenting with new chairing techniques to find out more about the Critical Response Process, and consider using it in projects of their own.

Chairing all three sessions (in Aberdeen and at True North) has been enormously helpful for me as a cultural historian seeking to understand the choices people have made, continue to make, and wish to make in the future, in planning, carrying out, recording and analysing all sorts of human action. Timespan's unique position between the worlds of heritage and contemporary arts makes it an excellent venue for discussions of the kind I chaired in spring 2015, and I hope many more will follow.


Lisa Collinson
Aberdeen University

Contributors

Nicky Bird is an artist whose work considers the contemporary relevance of found photographs, and hidden histories of specific sites, investigating how they remain resonant. In varying ways she incorporates new photography with oral histories, genealogy, and collaborations with people who have a significant connection to the original site, archive or artefact. Nicky is a member of The Family Ties Network, a research group of writers and artists who explore memory, space, place and the family in photography and moving image. She is also the PhD Co-Coordinator for Fine Art and Design at the Glasgow School of Art.

Peter Davidson is Senior Research Fellow of Campion Hall, University of Oxford. His research focuses on the inter-relations of the arts in the early-modern period: symbols and emblems, festivals, gardens, the applied arts. He is particularly interested in baroque internationalism and in the literary and visual arts of the Counter-reformation. He is Curator of Campion Hall's art collection and archives. As author of *The Idea of North,* Peter makes us realise that north is more a goal than a place. True north may be unreachable, but *The Idea of North* brings its readers close to an understanding. His most recent book, published last November by Reaktion Books, is *The Last of the Light,* a cultural history of twilight.

Lisa Collinson lectures at the University of Aberdeen, with research interests in medieval Nordic and Celtic literature and law. Lisa has collaborated with sound and performance artists, and in 2014 led Artists, Academics and Ancient Texts with Ruth Barker, exploring ways in which ancient texts could bridge past and present through contemporary performance.

Sue Reid Sexton is the author of two novels set during and after the Clydebank Blitz of 1941, *Mavis's Shoe* and *Rue End Street.* She was resident writer on the Lateral North *Possible Scotland* tour in 2015, a project documenting the future. Her next book is *Writing on the Road: Campervan Love* and the *Joy of Solitude,* a work of non-fiction due out March 2016, about solo campervanning and creative process. She is interested in historical accuracy, local heritage and the junctions between truth and fiction. She lives in Glasgow in a house which is no longer falling down, and loves words.

Matt Sillars is a lecturer in Psychology, Photography and Culture Studies at the University of the Highlands and Islands. His research interests are in visual research methods, in particular the family snap photograph and its impact on national and cultural identity. He is also an executive board member of the Scottish Society for the History of Photography.

Robbie Synge is a Ross-shire based choreographer and performer who works regularly in education with young people and adults. Robbie practiced martial arts and hip-hop dance styles for many years before changing career path and studying on the Postgraduate Certificate: Dance in the Community programme at Laban, graduating with distinction in 2008. Robbie was a semi-finalist in The Place Prize for Contemporary Dance 2012 sponsored by Bloomberg with *Settlement,* and in 2014 was commissioned to create *Douglas* through the *respond_ project,* a collaboration between Yorkshire Dance, Breakfast Creatives and the University of Leeds funded through the Digital R&D Fund for the Arts.

True North Conference 2015 Contributors

Alan Miller
Lecturer, School of Computing, University of St Andrews

Alistair Gentry
Artist

Amanda Game
Independent Curator

Amy Todman
Referendum Curator, National Library of Scotland

Anna Vermehren
Director, Timespan

Anne Murray
Creative Facilitator

Chris Halliday
Family History Leader, Highland Archive Centre

Deirdre Nelson
Artist

Erin Farley
Storyteller

Frances Davis
Curator, Timespan

Gavin Macqueen
Photographer

Gemma Lord
Masters Student, Glasgow School of Art

Gerry Wood
Timespan Volunteer and Genealogist

Hannah Imlach
Artist

Issie Macphail
Research Fellow, Division of Health Research, Rural Health & Wellbeing, UHI

Jacquie Aitken
Heritage Officer, Timespan

Jennifer Allison
Archaeology Project Officer, Orkney Museum

Jo Clements
Archive Development Manager, Timespan

John McCaffery
Researcher, School of Computing, University of St Andrews,

Jon Macleod
Special Projects Curator,
An Lanntair

Karlyn Sutherland
Residency Development
Officer, Lyth Arts Centre

Keir Strickland
Lecturer, Department
of Archaeology, UHI

Kirsty Law
Scots Singer and Songwriter

Lateral North
Research and Design Collective

Lisa Collinson
Research Fellow, Centre
for Scandinavian Studies,
University of Aberdeen

Luca Nasciuti
Composer

Matt Sillars
Lecturer, Department of
Psychology, UHI

Moira Jeffrey
Writer and Freelance
Arts Journalist

Nicky Bird
Artist

Pat Law
Artist

Petra Vergunst
Community Artist,
Composer and Poet

Rachel Horsman
Curatorial Intern, Timespan

Ross Sinclair
Artist

Ruth Maclennan
Artist

Stevan Lockhart
Assynt Community Digital
Archive Initiative

Su Grierson
Artist

Sue Reid-Sexton
Writer

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