

INTERPRETATION

# JOURNAL

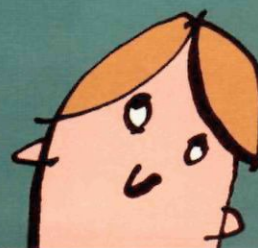
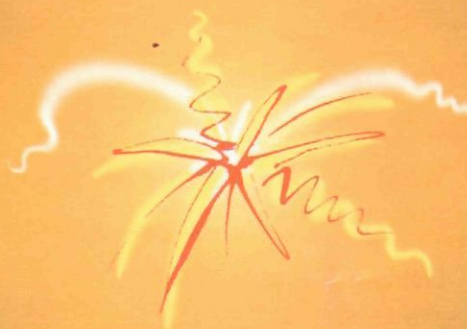


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## The Vital Spark

Keynote papers, AHI Conference 2007





# SPARKING THE FIRE OF REGENERATION

Alastair McIntosh argues that interpretation can play a life and death role in community regeneration – but only if it has the courage to reach the deepest roots of what it means to be human.

Every couple of months or so when I was in my late teens on the Isle of Lewis, word went round that 'the puffer' was due in at the local seaweed factory. The seaweed was sold as an industrial gelling agent. It started off all covered in mud and maggots, but ended up refined into food and medical products like ice-cream and toothpaste. Imagine that next time you're brushing your teeth!

Our job was to shift the sacks from the factory to the puffer while the tide was high. Each bag weighed a hundredweight. It was gruelling work. Your body was left feeling like a living corpse dragged around for two days after, but it didn't matter. What mattered was that you got an amazing thirty pounds for a few hours work – a week's wages in less than a day. But more than that, and this is my connection with our conference theme – we also experienced *The Vital Spark*.

This year's conference theme comes from the name of Neil Munro's fictional 'puffer' or cargo ship that plied the west of Scotland under the redoubtable command of Para Handy. According to Amazon's website, he and his insuperable crew 'are now part of Scotland's genetic make-up'. Now, this vital spark that likewise entered us when the puffer came was more than just gold in a pay packet. It was also something less tangible and more lasting. It arose from the urgency and the responsibility of having to turn the puffer around before her increasing weight ground onto the rocks beneath a falling tide.

'IT STARTED COVERED IN MUD AND MAGGOTS... BUT WE EXPERIENCED THE VITAL SPARK'

As a workforce we could only achieve this by intense cooperation. The younger men, like me at first, would be assigned the lighter jobs. But as soon as we grew strong enough we'd eagerly graduate onto the heavy stuff, catching and throwing bags from off the head of the conveyor belt.

It was simple work but one of those demanding common tasks that builds community. That rite of passage into the interconnection of meaningful community *was the vital spark*. Our capacity was tested to the limits. Our bodies became mixed with time and tide and produce of the environment. In such ways our identities developed.

We are talking here about something that was able to *quicken* the spirit. It cut to the *quick* – to the source of life. It generated wealth that was not just outer, but inner. And I think that this is what we need today as humanity struggles to find sustainable ways of continuing life on Earth. Wanton consumerism is trashing the earth. As Mark Twain put it, 'familiarity breeds contempt', and such is the nihilism demanding the generation of never-satisfied wants that we must reverse.

We are looking here at the need to re-enchance our world; to bring back a connection with magic, with spirit, with the essence. To find ways of quickening to not just any old life, but 'life abundant'. That is what the visitor seeks from Scotland. Enquire of the French or the German – and consider. What is the Loch Ness Monster to them? What are the standing stones? Or the savagely beautiful mountains and the tresses of tumbling streams? And what

RIGHT:  
The late Colin Macleod, founder of the GalGael Trust, is seated front right.





the mystique of whisky, the peculiarity of haggis, the warmth of shortbread and even the sparkle of Irn Bru or the own-goal joke of See-You-Jimmy hats? Don't cringe! Just try absorbing these icons for what they are. They have power because they stand for archetypal realities. As Carl Jung said in *Symbols of Transformation*:

One who thinks he can live without myth... is like one uprooted, having no true link either with the past, or with the ancestral life which continues within him... sunk in a subjective mania of his own devising, which he believes to be the newly discovered truth. *This plaything of his reason never grips his vitals.*

Regardless of what a Scot might or might not wear under the kilt, it is the vitality of the vitals that grabs me! I believe that people come to Scotland – and we Scots love the place – because it brings to life qualities often deadened by the hum and drum of the more mainstream modern world. Our national symbols stand for the wild, mysterious, passionate, generous, dancing, laughing, venerating and free. Like Calgacus the Pictish king against the Romans, or in those famous words from the Declaration of Arbroath, they represent an 'accent o the mind' expressed by freedom. If we cringe to the skirl of the pipes, it is from *freedom* we withdraw. For that skirl tells 'Freedom, come all ye!' to all the world.

Interpretation is education. But we must re-ground education. The world is full of people who have been trained, but too few are educated. True education, as the Latin origin

'WE ARE LOOKING AT THE NEED TO RE-ENCHANT OUR WORLD – WITH MAGIC, WITH SPIRIT, WITH THE ESSENCE'

BELOW:

The Vital Spark is "now part of Scotland's genetic make-up." Photo: Amazon.



of the word implies, is about 'leading out'. The secular world cannot see this for it has no metaphysical context into which to be led. But the ancients like Empedocles and Socrates got it. They saw the meaning of every life as being to express its God-given highest potential. The Greeks even had a word for this – *areté* – pronounced *ar-et-ay* – usually translated as excellence, quality, virtue, justice or the good. But more than any of these, *areté* really means to fire on all cylinders as a complete human being – head, heart and hand. And as Buddha, Jesus and Burns all so clearly saw, this means firing up to a life powered by love.

And there, in my view, lies the vital spark. In Govan I am a founding director of the GalGael Trust, started by the late Colin Macleod and coordinated by his wife, Gehan. We provide elementary training such as carving, weaving and boat-building. But it's elementary in both senses of the word. It's about reconnecting hard-pressed people with fire, air, earth and water; with community one with another and with the natural world. 'Why did you become a drug addict?' I asked a participant.

'Because,' he said, 'heroin took away my pain... but it also took away my soul.'

For GalGael the interpretation of cultural and environmental heritage is not an entertainment. Neither is it training in the narrow sense of that word. Rather, it is a matter of calling back the soul with those whose lives have rendered them the canaries down the noxious mines of communities poisoned by poverty, racism, sectarianism and the class system; poisoned by the knock-on intergenerational traumas of the wounded and stunted human heart.

That is why we need we need interpretation, above all, for cultural regeneration. We need it in a manner like MacDiarmid's 'little white rose of Scotland/That smells sharp and sweet and breaks the heart.'

That demands deep leadership, even eldership, from our national institutions. We must reclaim history that tells our past and vision that tells our future. And there is a performance indicator to be applied as the measure of all we do. It is the only one that ever really mattered: 'Does it give life?'

**Alastair McIntosh is visiting professor of human ecology at the Centre for Human Ecology, University of Strathclyde, and the author of *Soil and Soul*.**



# FOREWORD: WELCOME TO AVIEMORE

Welcome to this AHI Journal which focuses on the Vital Spark Conference in Aviemore, Scotland, in the heart of the Cairngorms National Park. This has been AHI's biggest conference and a large number of members, and others, from all over the world came together for an outstanding event.

2007 is a special year for the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, as it celebrates the area's traditional and contemporary culture in a reflection on the old and a celebration of the new. Recognising this, a group of Scottish based interpreters got together in early 2005, to plan this event, to celebrate the role of interpretation in connecting our heritage with our communities and visitors. Over 250 people explored, debated and shared ideas, and we hope that this Journal will give you a flavour of some of the quality presentations from respected speakers from around the globe.

Keynote speakers addressed the conference themes of:

- The Vital Spark: interpretation as the driver for cultural regeneration
- Creativity and innovation: interpreting remote and fragile areas
- Voices in interpretation: languages, cultures and communities
- Authenticity and re-interpretation: traditional icons in the 21st century

Alistair McIntosh made an impassioned plea for leadership, from our national institutions, to 'reclaim history that tells of our past and vision that tells of our future'. For him, connecting with environmental and cultural heritage begged only one question – does it give life?

Jane James asked us: what's love got to do with it? Conjuring up poignant and wistful memories for most, she made a strong argument that for engaging and meaningful interpretation all you need is love!

A challenge to energising our creative talents was the subject of John Pastorelli's workshop and he offered many tips that will work for those who consider themselves to have had a creativity bypass. His creative sandpit concept can enrich our perspectives of the world.

Susan Strauss – no creativity bypass here – engaged the artistic to recover the vital spark in our work as interpreters. Through examples of Thomas Moran and John Muir, she revealed how their mastery of art and writing turned image into meaning and changed the course of conservation in the USA. 'Archetypal truth and soul had found its way into a singular image and look at the response'.

Shonaig Macpherson spoke of the challenges of reinterpreting key stories in the life of a country – the challenge of 'overturning myth' and seeking truth and authenticity. She clearly saw the role of the interpreter as the guide who makes the connection.

Jette Sandahl talked of the need for cultural democracy in the museum world and the belief that cultural participation and plurality represented our most important source of revitalisation. All this presents challenges of control and who gets to speak.

Finally, on the 50th anniversary of Freeman Tilden's classic book, Sam Ham reviewed the basic assertion that 'through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection'. Based on the recent advances in cognitive and behavioural psychology, Tilden had it absolutely right!

**Ruth Taylor and Bill Taylor**

*Joint Chair of Conference Steering Group*

Jointly run by Interpret Scotland and AHI this event has been made possible through 11 separate funders and the tireless work of the steering group and many other volunteers.

