

Americans don the kilt and go all tartan!

Report from Katie Macleod in New York

It is a global city in a nation of immigrants, the entry point for generations of newcomers: New York City is like no other, but for two weeks in April it took on a distinctly Scottish edge. Tartan Week 2012 kicked off with a fashion show and culminated in a parade down the city's spine.

April 6th was officially recognised as National Tartan Day by the U.S. government in 1997, and national celebrations have been taking place every spring since. This year saw whisky tastings at Chelsea Piers, ceilidhs on the Upper East Side and a charity run (in kilts) through Central Park. Especially Scottish was the 'An Leabhar Mòr: The Great Book' reading at the New York Poets House on April 3rd, part of the Ellis Island exhibition of the same name.

Reading from their work were Christopher Whyte, Aonghas Dubh MacNeacail and Lewis writer Kevin MacNeil. Both the book – a combination of old and new Gaelic poetry, artwork and calligraphy – and the associated exhibition are the creation of Stornoway-based Proseact nan Ealan. "The book is going round the world raising awareness that Gaelic exists as a language, that we exist as a people," says Kevin, "and it's doing so in an effective way because it's appealing to people's emotions through poetry and visual art."

The poetry of the three present certainly appeals to the emotions of the audience. Christopher Whyte's first reading focuses on the philosophical question of self; Kevin's touch on love and humour; and Aonghas Dubh ends with a poem about his mother's funeral (being less than complimentary about some church elders from Skye). The intimate venue overlooks the Hudson River, with an audience that is mostly English-speaking, so the three Scots alternate between Gaelic and English renditions of their work.

"You can write a shopping list in Gaelic and it sounds like a poem," Kevin tells those assembled. He elicits laughter from the small crowd, and not for the first time in the evening. "I can ramp up the humour, or be more solemn – but never too solemn," he explains the following day as we sit in the city's Bryant Park. "I pitch it to the audience. I look at the audience and then decide what to read."

Kevin is in Manhattan for the first time in a decade; a delay that was partly due to a recently-conquered fear of flying. "You're six times more likely to be killed by a relative than in a plane crash," he says as he details the nature of the confidence course he attended before crossing the pond – a rather different journey from crossing the Minch. After ten years, Kevin is happy to be back. "I love the diversity. I love people watching. It's like a little emblem of the world," he says of New York. The city that never sleeps is also proving ripe for inspiration: "People do good dialogue here, better dialogue than any other city I've been to. People talk as if they're being filmed." It's an acute observation, given the movie-star status of the Big Apple.

MacNeil, Whyte and MacNeacail have all contributed to the Great Book, but as the Ellis Island exhibition is a smaller version of the original, only the latter's poem, 'All that came in that one coracle,' is on display. The work is available for viewing just off the



old immigrant arrivals hall, where the sound of live fiddle music can be heard floating through the air on Tartan Day.

It is interesting to see the history and culture behind the project, and the view of Scotland from this side of the Atlantic. The old entrance to America is certainly a symbolic spot to showcase the work of Scots and the influence Gaels have had on North America throughout the years. There are Saltire flags awaiting visitors, while the marches and jigs being piped by the pier draw squeals from excitable school tours. Listening to bagpipes in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty was surreal, but even more surprising was a conversation in Gaelic with a Canadian about my Ruadhach roots.

The final fling came in the form of a parade along the Avenue of the Americas in Manhattan. Pipe bands from across the country marched past the Rockefeller Centre, with representatives from the

Scottish Government also in the line-up. They struggled to compete with the crowd of Scottie dogs, dressed to impress with tartan ties and leads, who very nearly stole the show – and that was with the Loch Ness Monster making an appearance.

From poetry readings to parades, Tartan Week 2012 had it all. As you sail over the Hudson with the city behind you and Lady Liberty in front, the immigrant arrival experience here is not hard to imagine. As this year's celebrations show, the ancestral ties are still strong: strong enough to successfully show off America's Scottish side in style.

**Above and below right, the parade
outside the News Corp offices
Below left, festivities on Ellis Island**



Dithean 's Dealan-Dè
Eòin 's Èisg
Cuileag 's Crotal
Maorach Beathaichean

Surprise Residents & Visitors

to the
Outer Hebrides

Local Flora & Fauna
Exhibition of Photos & Fun
Quiz

Museum nan Eilean
Sgoil Lionacleit
Isle of Benbecula

Open Tues—Sat
Same hours as Library
Runs Until Thursday 31 May

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