

The Scottish International Storytelling Festival: From The Pacific Coast



Photo courtesy of Solen Collet

Dawne McFarlane first visited **Vancouver Island** over 25 years ago. Coming from Toronto, she had hardly seen the sea before – but now she was heading for the remote north of the island; friends were working as wilderness guides for the summer and wanted her to join them on a kayaking trip. That September she was to discover places and people that have helped to shape the rest of her life. She also saw for the first time one of the most beautiful animals on this planet, the **orca whale**.

On Sunday Dawne, a professional storyteller, (as was her Scottish grandfather, who served in the Black Watch during the Great War) led a spellbinding session at the **Scottish Storytelling Centre**, in which she spoke about her life-changing trip to **Hanson Island, British Columbia**.

Dawne began the evening by playing a recording of orca sounds. Orca (or killer whales) live in ‘clans’, and make these sounds by taking air in and forcing it out through their foreheads; research has shown that different clans use different dialects to communicate. Orca are highly intelligent and social creatures who have been swimming in every ocean in the world for millions of years; they are honoured by **First Nation people**, who call them ‘the revered one’ and sometimes bring them offerings of abalone shells. When Dawne set off for Vancouver on her first trip, one of her greatest hopes was that she might catch a glimpse of these magnificent animals; her hopes were to be richly fulfilled.



Photo by Jeremy
Keith

Vancouver is on the west coast of Canada; from there the Pacific Ocean stretches out to Japan. Arriving for the first time in this land of snow-capped mountains and huge trees, Dawne followed a route that many Scots have taken before her, across to Vancouver Island then north to **Telegraph Cove** on **Johnston Strait**. The departure point for the kayak trip was **Alert Bay**, a First Nation settlement – it seemed tiny at the time, but later, on her return from the wilderness, it was to appear more like ‘a seething metropolis’. In Alert Bay she saw totems decorated with carvings of eagles, bears, wolves, salmon – and orca. Traveling northwards, the group camped in fragrant cedar forests and on remote and beautiful clam-shell beaches; one night Dawne was privileged to see the Northern Lights, then she heard ‘what sounded like an electric charge’.

Orcas were gliding through the bay in the darkness, their dorsal fins standing up in the water. And they were breathing together, in harmony.

As they paddled up an inlet, the kayakers came across an abandoned First Nation settlement; beautiful buildings stood empty, totems were decaying, returning to the earth. ‘I could hear’, says Dawne, ‘the lamentations of the children torn from their mothers, of the people torn from their ancient homelands, the cries of separation.’ Then the weather changed, and they were kayaking through wind, rain and fog; ‘I trusted my friends, and I surrendered to a nature that was so much bigger than me.’ As the storm passed, a perfect cove appeared; the group camped on soft ground and walked ‘in the ancient growth of the central rainforests’; they saw red, white and orange fungi; above them towered hemlock, spruce and fir trees – and giant cedars. Dawne invited the audience onto the stage to link hands and form a circle – this, she explained, was the circumference of the largest tree, ‘Grandmother

Cedar.'



Photo from OrcaLab's website.

Dawne's friends had more than one purpose in choosing their course; they planned to visit **Paul Spong**, and had even carried a bottle of wine in one of the kayaks as a gift. Paul has spent many years researching orca in Queen Charlotte Strait, founding **OrcaLab** at **Hanson Island** in 1970. Shortly after Dawne arrived the cry of 'Orca!' was heard – 'people appeared from nowhere, out of the forest, running towards the observation platform, already looking out for the whales – and they knew their names'. These were researchers at the Lab; they recognised the individual orca not only by their physical characteristics but also by their sounds. Even as the whales passed out of sight, their haunting songs could be heard via the Lab's hydrophones. Dawne was captivated.



Paul Spong was originally guided to Hanson Bay – a summer breeding ground for orca – by First Nation people. OrcaLab is now an internationally recognised centre, its guiding principle being 'research without interference.' Spong describes Hanson Bay as 'the place of my heart' – a sentiment shared by Dawne, who struggled to leave and has since revisited many times with her own family. Orca, says Spong, 'could destroy one another in a moment – but they don't; they know how to manage power and relationships.'

Dawne ended the session with a song:

'We are crossing the water our whole lives through,

We are making a passage that is straight and true,

Every heart is a vessel, every dream is a light,

Shining through the darkness of the darkest night'

The very last words were left to the orca, their enchanting songs echoing through the room as they crossed the water, breathing in harmony.



More information about OrcaLab can be found [here](#).

The Scottish International Storytelling Festival 2014 continues this week, ending on Sunday 2nd November. The full programme is available from the link below or pick up a paper copy from the Centre and other venues.

<http://www.theedinburghreporter.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/SSC-Fest-2014-Webv21.pdf>