

Letter from Scotland

While Edinburgh has been celebrating the arts, Glasgow has been enjoying “the power of the bike”, the world cycling championships.

Both are huge international events and they illustrate a hopeful way forward for our troubled world. Sport and the arts are “infinite industries” where there is no limit on what they can produce and how many people they can employ, without damaging the planet too much.

The various Edinburgh festivals – the International Festival, the Festival Fringe, the Book Festival, the Military Tattoo etc – double the population of the city in August, create 5,000 jobs and bring in £400 million to the city and another £300 million to the rest of Scotland. This year there are more than 3,500 events and artists from at least 70 countries. More than three million tickets will be sold. It rivals the Football World Cup and the Olympic Games.



Festivals and fears. The Royal Mile, Edinburgh.



Photo: Alan Simpson

The World Cycling Championships involve 13 different disciplines – road racing, velodrome events, BMX and mountain-biking and their para-cycling partners. Although most events are taking place in Glasgow, some are spread across the country – from the Borders to Fort William, and many roads in between. There are 8,000 participants from 120 countries and 4,000 volunteer stewards. It's cost £60 million to stage (half from government funds) and is expected to earn at least £67 million in revenue for the city of Glasgow alone.

The men's road race was famously disrupted by environmental protestors near Falkirk, half way through the 74-mile course. The peloton was forced to stop for nearly an hour. Four members of the "This is Rigged" anti-oil and gas campaign glued themselves to the road, a protest widely condemned, especially for disrupting a non-fossil-fuelled event.

But the protest did remind us of the larger issues of our

times – climate change, our obsession with economic growth, the migrant crisis. And this in a week when we have seen floods, heat waves and fires across the world, desperate efforts to save the Amazon Rain Forest and boatloads of people fleeing the deserts of North Africa.



Nicola Benedetti, CBE, the Director of Edinburgh International Festival announcing her first programme for the 2023 Edinburgh International Festival PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter
“Where do we go from here,” is the slogan adopted by this year’s Edinburgh International Festival. It’s written in bright yellow across all its posters on a slightly smudged, uneasy background. The festival director, the violinist Nicola Benedetti, CBE, has borrowed the slogan from the title of a book by Martin Luther King Jr, and like him, she wants those attending the festival to ask themselves three questions: do they choose community over chaos, do they choose hope over adversity and do they choose a perspective that’s not their own? The Festival, she says, should “help us beat back the

demons of boredom, drudgery and loneliness. It also asks us to consider timeless, transcendental possibilities, to dream beyond our ordinary lives”.

I wonder how many of the 144,000 school students who received their exam results this week will dream beyond their ordinary lives. The pass rate was pretty good, at 77 per cent overall. The moaners point out that’s 2 per cent down on last year and the attainment gap has widened between students living in rich areas and those living in poor areas. But these rises and falls in the annual figures are small and can probably be explained by statistical error. The real measure, as usual, is not to be captured in figures but in the quality of “education” in a wider sense – is it inspirational, is it challenging, is it fun?

Despite the alarming pictures of climate change on our television screens this week, there have been signs that Scotland is retreating from its Green agenda. There are rumblings inside the SNP against their coalition with the Green Party. Kate Forbes, who narrowly lost out on being first minister, has been calling for SNP members to be given a say over policies agreed with the Greens, on plastic bottle recycling and marine protected areas. Humza Yousaf, who won the SNP leadership race back in March, has defended the policies themselves but he has put them on hold while he thinks of a better way of implementing them, without annoying the business community or the fishing villagers.

The Greens themselves have gone into hiding and their founding father, Robin Harper, who led the party into the Scottish Parliament, has resigned his membership. “The party has lost the plot,” he said. And he pointed in particular to its decision to join the independence campaign.

One of the Fringe shows I’ve been to this week was a tribute to Sir Walter Scott, in song and verse. He is credited with rediscovering Scotland after it “lost the plot” and the Battle

of Culloden in the 18th century. We've tried to distance ourselves from his tartan tradition. But the road to a modern Scotland has not been easy, it's more of a crazy pavement of agricultural and industrial revolutions. Now we're uncertain over so many things, not least independence and our commitment to a "green" way of life.

But for aw' that, we can still put on a show like The Edinburgh Festival and The World Cycling Championships.



First Minister Humza Yousaf published a paper setting out the proposed approach to citizenship in New Register House where a roundtable discussion was held PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter