

A Carrying Stream – An Immersive Escape

There's a certain predictability to life in Edinburgh in the period immediately after the Festival. Once the carnival leaves town, the weather seems to improve.

There may be a certain chill in the evening air but that air is dry, aiding the efforts of those dismantling the various Fringe venues that sprawl over the public spaces in August. The pop-ups are being taken down.

A walk through the city centre is tinged with regret. Posters for the tremendous shows you didn't see loom large: the faces of the performers glance disapprovingly. As you pass the venues you failed to get, you make a mental note to go next year...that's the plan.

As the encrustations of the Festivals are stripped away, some of Edinburgh's lower profile cultural spaces re-emerge. The exhibition space at Edinburgh University's Main Library is an obvious example. One of Edinburgh's slightly hidden cultural nooks; one which is often walked past. On Saturday afternoon,

I was the only visitor. Admittedly, the exhibition was competing with a glorious sunny afternoon outside. Exhibitions such as this are perhaps better suited to the dreich days which will undoubtedly come again soon.

In the square outside, the Fringe venues and refreshment booths are being flat-packed away, leaving behind torn and scarred turf. Will it heal before wintertime descends? Inside the building, an engrossing, immersive exhibition *A Carrying Stream* is lying in wait. For those looking for something to help them recalibrate and reconnect in the wake of the Festival, the exhibition offers much.



Coble by J. Valentine (1882) from the Photographic Archive of the School of Scottish Studies Archives.

The exhibition makes highly creative use of segments of the Sound Archive of the University of Edinburgh's School of Scottish Studies Archives. It fuses sound, image and object in a way that transports you emotionally back in time in a

dialogue with past generations and past ways of life. At the centrepiece of *A Carrying Stream* are new commissions by artists Blair Coron, Fraser MacBeath, and Carla Sayer.

Composer Blair Coron's 'The Sea Close By' uses archival interviews of people of those in coastal communities as the inspiration. For Coron, 'you can learn more through these voices than you do in the history books' because 'you have that emotional connection as well'. Coron's piano based 'Elergy' is particularly effective, with its use of birdsong. Close your eyes and you feel as if you are walking along a bay on a misty autumn morning. In contrast, 'Song For Lismore' might transport you to a barren hillside with the sun setting.

While you listen you absorb fantastic, evocative black and white photos by Kenneth Goldstein. The whole experience gives you a feel of briefly connecting to a long past era. The blend of voices and music is reminiscent of the radio ballads of the late 1950s that transformed the depiction of working people. These groundbreaking documentaries produced by Ewan MacColl and Charles Parker are considered masterpieces of radio, weaving together the voices of rarely-heard communities with folk songs.

The voices in *A Carrying Stream* are themselves are redolent of particular time and place, with the speakers using snatches of Gaelic and Doric. One of the speakers has the same cadences as the recently deceased broadcaster and author Robbie Shepherd, who did so much to keep alive the Doric language.

Carla Sayer's 'Through the Mill' offers an audio and visual journey through Scotland's industrial past, using the artist's own millworker great-grandmother as the initial inspiration. Building on the other work in the exhibition, it relays a Scotland shifting from agriculture to industry. The music played uses antique instruments from St Cecilia's Hall (another hidden cultural gem in the city), and is combined

with archival field recordings of textile workers.

Fraser MacBeath's video collage begins with log fires and other homely sounds. His work involves capturing and manipulating field recordings, and reusing archival material and presenting those in immersive sound environments. His piece initially feels wintry but cosy. Soon though the barrage of images and sounds increases in intensity. Deep spiritual themes emerge, as expressed by the narrators.

One of them suggests that the area she is describing is so rich because in this land is 'trapped... every soul who has ever worked there'. Their imprint lingers, embedded in the very soil. What is also manifested in the piece is that those who lived and worked here were so close to nature not, as we might be, alienated from it. The narrative blends voices with faded images, adding a luminous and mysterious element.

A Carrying Stream also features the range of recording devices that have been used to capture sound and music over the Decades. Starting with wax cylinders (and the gramophone for playing them) from 1897, continues with various types of open reel tape players, such as those manufactured by Nagra. Coming closer to our age, it features technology that didn't have a long shelf life, such as minidisks. This chronology of ageing audio devices again emphasises time passing.

A Carrying Stream is a fantastic example of the way that archives should not be seen as dead piles of dusty material but a great resource for creative reuse. It's the synthesis of the two that creates the magic in an exhibition such as this.

A Carrying Stream is at Edinburgh University Main Library Exhibition Gallery, until 30 September 2023 (Monday to Saturday, 10am until 6pm).