



International Ethnology and Folklore Society (SIEF) 2025, Aberdeen

In June, we hosted the 17th congress of the Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore (SIEF), the largest organization representing our disciplines on the world stage, with 1128 delegates contributing 880 papers and workshops across 118 panels and the biggest conference hosted at the University of Aberdeen.

With the conference theme of Unwriting, we encouraged participants to confront the legacies of our habitual text-centric practices of 'writing culture' and think about other ways to know and learn, emphasizing cultural equity and parity of esteem. Indigenous, community-based perspectives, and marginalized groups were foregrounded, with invited plenary sessions on, Engagement, (Un)writing, Vulnerability; Recentering Authority; Making Space and Throwing Shapes in Archives of Tradition; Challenging Modal Habits; and Unwriting and Resisting,

which featured Scotland's own Jess Smith, who delivered a powerful and personal example of the value of studying culture from within.

The film programme, featuring 26 ethnographic films was supplemented by screenings of our Elphinstone Sessions, along with other examples of Scottish culture on film.

During the Congress, we offered an Academic Freedom Sanctuary where people affected by recent assaults on institutions of higher learning could share their experiences and find solidarity. We stand behind SIEF's recent 'Statement on ongoing assaults on academic freedom in the US'.

The Congress finished with a cèilidh dance at the Beach Ballroom, its wonderful sprung floor never less than packed by ethnologists and folklorists from around

the world, and an informal after party at Krakatoa at which a, let's say, different kind of dancing was practised. To end the week there was an excursion to Castle Fraser, then across to the coast to Dunnottar Castle and Stonehaven to show the conference delegates a taste of what the region has to offer.

Congratulations to Nicolas Le Bigre on his election to the SIEF board, and many heartfelt thanks to our local committee members for their imagination and dedication, to our scientific committee, and to our friends at NomadIT, for their support throughout.

SIEF 2025 was celebratory, scholarly, and immersive, bringing the Institute's thirty-year record of pioneering work to audiences from all over our academic world.

Thomas A. McKean



Delegates at the welcome reception marquee on Elphinstone Lawn, King's College



Delegates at the welcome reception in Elphinstone Hall, King's College



Opening Plenary with I to r: Don Kulick, Thomas A. McKean, and Amy Shuman

Refugee Storytelling Bring Cultures Together

This spring the Institute was pleased to participate in Refugee Festival Scotland, funded by the Scottish Refugee Council. From April to June we hosted three storytelling workshops for refugees and migrants in the region, partnering with our friends at Grampian Association of Storytellers and Friends of Al-Amal. Storytellers David Heathfield, Phyll McBain, and Jackie Ross led the respective workshops, helping attendees learn about Scotland while gaining linguistic and cultural confidence. Participants listened to traditional stories from the North-East and around the world before working on their own versions individually and in

groups. The stories were then shared in English, Scots, and in the participants' own languages, including Tigre – from our Eritrean tellers – in addition to Ukrainian, Farsi, Spanish, Kurdish, and Arabic. Our final workshop, held on the top floor of the Sir Duncan Rice Library, was open to the general public with whom we shared tales from around the world while admiring lovely views of Aberdeen. We would like to thank festival volunteers Sebin and Shriya, who supported us at the final workshop, as well the participants and storytellers, and of course the funders who made the workshops possible.

Nicolas Le Bigre



Participants and organiser at the May workshop, photo by Alison Sharman



From the Director

In November 2024 I attended the American Folklore Society (AFS) annual meeting in Albuquerque where I presented a tribute to honour a dear friend and colleague Luisa Del Giudice whom I've known through ballad conferences and AFS for more

than thirty years. A fellow of the AFS, and a former Kommission für Volksdichtung (KfV) president and SIEF board member, Luisa is a great contributor to our field, with work on customs and foodways, ballads and songs, and, most recently, a great collection of essays documenting women's experience in our field. At that same AFS meeting, I was made a Fellow of the AFS, in the company of some wonderful scholars and friends.

This February and June, I've made return trips to Santiago Atitlán in western Guatemala, where, with local researcher Mayalitza Sosof Sisay, I am working on a CD and a book with songmakers Pedro Mendoza Mendoza and José Guox and their band Maya Tz'utujil. Our work, part of the University of Edinburgh's Proyecto Ixchel, explores the value of Mayan environmental and social knowledge, aiming to reconnect younger generations with cultural heritage germane in this era of climate crisis.

In June, we hosted the biannual Congress of the Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore, the biggest conference the University has ever seen (see front page).

Preparations are now well underway for the Button Boxes & Moothies event in November, led by Frances Wilkins and a team of enthusiasts (see page 3).

The North Atlantic Fiddle Convention, 24 to 28 June 2026, continues to take shape under the guidance of Festival Co-Leads, Kirsty Clements and Laura Harrington. The guest list and programme are already looking outstanding, with attention now turning to sponsorship and funding applications. Be sure to note the dates in your diary and keep checking northatlanticfiddle.com for updates and more information.

The Friends of the Elphinstone Institute have begun work on arrangements for a Ballad Bus outing in September, and a memorial concert in November for the late Charlie Allan, a longtime supporter of the Institute's work and tireless advocate for North-East culture.

We said farewell to Simon Gall, our Public Engagement Officer, in the Spring. We appreciate his excellent work over the past seven years, and wish him well in his future endeavours.

In September we will welcome a new appointment in the role of Doric/Scots Language Worker, funded by a generous legacy from the late Forbes Hurry, a longtime member of the Friends of the Elphinstone Institute, to enhance Doric and North-East Scots language use in the region.

And finally, congratulations to Dr Lauren Hossack, who passed her PhD viva with flying colours. Lauren's dissertation looked at the University's student show, its use of Doric over the years, and its place in the cultural life of the city and the student experience.

Thomas A. McKean

Students and Graduates Chipping In

The Institute is privileged to have the continued support of its graduates and current students, many of whom have been actively involved in various projects during the past academic term. I'm particularly pleased to report that MLitt graduates Mary Stratman ('23) and Andrada Lilburn ('23) have paid roles as research assistants. Mary is supporting Frances Wilkins on her Seinn Spirodail project documenting events, conducting interviews with participants, and helping with further development of the project and its resources. Andra is the fieldworker for the Aberlangs project, jointly co-ordinated by Modern Languages, Linguistics, and the Elphinstone Institute, for which she has been conducting interviews, making short films, and creating exhibition materials about multilingualism in Aberdeen. Kaitlyn Woodruff ('24) has been editing our 'Culture in Everyday Life' podcast and has been a great support during a number of our public events. Current students Taylor Palmer and Emma Russell both have internships with the Elphinstone Institute Archives, with Taylor conducting video editing work and Emma organising archival documents. Both have also acted as videographers, documenting events including storytelling evenings, public talks, and musical performances. Finally, the success of SIEF depended on the hard work of those who contributed as members of the Scientific Committee, the Local Committee, and/or as volunteers, including our current MLitt students, PhD students Mary Cane, Lauren Hossack, Melissa La Rose, Claire Needler, and Brenna Quinton, as well as MLitt graduate Eilidh Whiteford ('18) and PhD graduate Sakis Barmpalexis ('20). The connections we have and cherish with students and graduates help make the Institute such a special place for all of us.



Mary Stratman interviewing Innes MacDonald, singer and employee at An Taigh Cèilidh (Stornoway, 18 June 2025)

Nicolas Le Bigre

Supporting the Elphinstone Institute

In the current financial climate, the Institute relies ever more on donations and legacy funding. It is important to note that our amazing range of programmes, partnerships, and projects, are funded by these wonderful gifts. We encourage anyone with a belief in the North-East's internationally renowned and domestically treasured culture and traditions to get in touch with any ideas about broadening our funding base, helping to secure our future for the next thirty years. As a unique bridge between institution and region, the Institute's valuable work needs your support.

Help us to continue and expand our mission to research, celebrate, and promote the culture of the North-East and North of Scotland.

Email: elphinstone@abdn.ac.uk

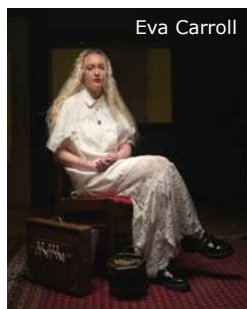
Tel: 01224 272996

Button Boxes & Moothies 2025

I am delighted to announce that Button Boxes & Moothies will be taking place once more in Aberdeen from 14–16 November 2025. This is an important festival which highlights the wonderful (and often over-looked) family of small free-reed instruments – concertinas, melodeons, button accordions, mouth organs and Jew's harps. The festival will centre around King's College, in the heart of Old Aberdeen, with a focus on workshops, concerts, an old-style cèilidh, sessions, exhibitions, talks and more. Free reed instrument players of all ages and abilities are encouraged to take part.

We have a fantastic line-up of musicians who will be teaching and performing at the festival. They include Sandra Kerr (English concertina), Rick Epping (English concertina, and Jew's harp), Will Pound (moothie and melodeon), Sam Mabbett (diatonic button accordion), Allan MacDonald and Michael Wright (Jew's harp), Kisna Panesar (anglo concertina), Aaron Clark (melodeon), Alex Wade (English concertina), Eva Carroll and Meabh Mulligan (anglo concertina).

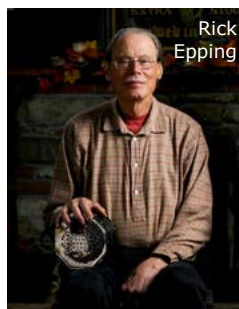
Sandra Kerr, who will be attending from North-East England, says of the festival, 'One of the great delights of being a musician and playing the English Concertina is when other people want to learn from you. Being able to pass on new areas of repertoire or technique is enormous fun and very satisfying. So, I'm very much looking forward to being in Aberdeen for this event – working with players I've never met, and playing, performing, catching up and jamming



Eva Carroll



Kisna Panesar



Rick Epping



Will Pound

with the amazing musicians appearing at Button Boxes & Moothies. It's going to be great!'

Anglo Concertina player Kisna Panesar, who is currently studying at the RCS and has been booked to perform and teach at the festival, says, 'Button Boxes & Moothies brings together wonderfully imaginative worlds. It's a celebration of creativity and an amazing opportunity for learning. I am so privileged to be a part of this festival and can't wait to meet everyone.'

To launch the festival the Lord Provost of Aberdeen, Dr David Cameron, will be hosting a Civic Reception at the Town House in the centre of Aberdeen on Friday, 14 November from 3–5pm. This is a free event which can be booked via the website, with music from some of the wonderful musicians booked for the festival.

Festival tickets will be available on the website from early September. In the meantime, you will find plenty of information about the artists and a provisional programme at www.buttonboxesandmoothies.com.

Many thanks to Aberdeen City Council's Culture Investment Programme, the Friends of the Elphinstone Institute, TMSA, and SC&T for supporting the event.

Frances Wilkins

Christmas Day Temperance Walk

On Christmas day 2024, I was not in London nor Düsseldorf as usual but in Aberdeenshire. I was on a Temperance Walk, something I had hitherto only read or written about in my MLitt dissertation. My dissertation was about 'Continuity and Change in St Combs', my father's village, but this Christmas Day walk was in fact the Cotton walk in the neighbouring village of Inverallochy.

I had been invited to a wedding in Aberdeen before Christmas and decided to stay local and spend Christmas in the Knuckle villages. On Christmas morning, I walked along the shore in the mild weather, and heard the noise of the flute band. The St Combs walk was due to take place on 2 January, after I had left to go back to Düsseldorf, so it was the Inverallochy one now or never!

The flute band was assembled in the street as I came up from the shore. There seemed to be fewer people walking than I had expected, but the sense of community was palpable and many were standing outside their houses shouting Merry Christmas as the march progressed.

When I think of the old black and white photos of the past Knuckle walks, they all look rather purposeful and orderly, perhaps reflecting the original temperance impetus of this tradition. This walk, however, people stopped to greet their neighbours, and the impression I got from being on this walk was how this was a tradition rooted in the local community. Whether participants still remember the temperance background, the feeling of knowing their family roots and interconnectedness in this old fishing village was very strong.

I was newsing to one woman, telling her that this was my first walk and that as a child I used to come up every summer to visit granny in St Combs. As we chatted, we found a connection through an old uncle and aunt who had emigrated to Canada, and we both forgot about the walk for a while, discussing more connections between us.

When I told a London friend later about this coincidence, she was dismissive: statistically in such coastal, isolated, in-bred communities, she told me, you must be related to many local people and so what! It was the walk itself that led us to this discovery, the encounter in the context of tradition, not a statistic. We shared memories through this village, and we met through the walk, though we had never clapped eyes on each other before.

Perhaps as children we passed each other on the beach engrossed in the other local tradition, in the hunt for Johnny Groaties, eyes down on the beach scouring for these wee lucky shells and not looking elsewhere!



Kate Cowe, MLitt Graduate 2023

Kate Cowe

Elphinstone News

Who's Who in the Institute

Patron

Very Rev. Prof. Sir Iain Torrance,
Pro-Chancellor

Staff

Dr Thomas A. McKean, Director, Ethnology and Folklore, ballads, custom and belief, Gaelic tradition, J. M. Carpenter Project

Dr Frances Wilkins, Senior Lecturer, Ethnomusicology, sacred singing in coastal communities, Scottish fiddle traditions in northern Canada

Nicolas Le Bigre, Lecturer, Ethnology and Folklore, archives

Professor Emeritus Ian Russell, Ethnology, Folklore, and Ethnomusicology, oral traditions, including singing, music-making, drama, and speech

Alison Sharman, Administrator

Kirsty Clements, Festival Co-Lead, NAFCo 2026 (North Atlantic Fiddle Convention)

Laura Harrington, Festival Co-Lead, NAFCo 2026 (North Atlantic Fiddle Convention)

Honorary Research Fellows

Dr David Atkinson, J. M. Carpenter Project

Dr Pat Ballantyne, Scottish step-dance traditions

Dr Athanasios Barmplexis, contemporary shamanic healing in Scotland

Nataliya Bezborodova, custom and belief

Dr Julia Bishop, J. M. Carpenter Project

Sheena Blackhall, creative writing in Scots

Dr Elaine Brattke, J. M. Carpenter Project

Dr Katherine Campbell, ethnomusicology, music performance

Dr Robert Young Walser, J. M. Carpenter Project

Les Wheeler, Scots Language, education

Dr Sheila Young, marriage ritual during the pandemic

Research Students

Mary Cane, the grandmother experience in family life today

Morag Johnston, early fiddle music composed and collected by Scottish women

Tolheishel Khaling, Uipo (Khoibu) folk songs

Melissa La Rose, fairy belief in the twenty-first century

Robert Milne, composition and Doric language texts

Claire Needler, Elphinstone Scholarship, bilingualism in North-East schools

Máire Ní Bhaoill, traditional singing among children in Ireland

Brenna Quinton, vernacular religion: blended Christian and spiritual well-being practices in modern-day Scotland

Edda Starck, landscapes of music: the more-than-human lives and politics of musical instruments

Lorna Summers, community boatbuilding on the Moray coast

Carley Williams, safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in Scotland

Chris Wright, Elphinstone Scholarship, the role of traditional arts in place-based education

Toulmin Prize 2025

The Toulmin short story prize for 2025 has been launched with the deadline for entries on 5 September, 2025. The prize of £500, generously sponsored by Martin and Steven Reid, grandsons of John Reid (aka Toulmin), will be presented at the prize-giving event on Friday, 3 October at the Sir Duncan Rice Library.



*David Toulmin
(aka John Reid)*

www.abdn.ac.uk/elphinstone/public-engagement/toulmin-prize/

25 YEARS NORTH ATLANTIC FIDDLE CONVENTION 2026

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

ELPHINSTONE

For updates and more information, visit northatlanticfiddle.com

SAVE THE DATE 24TH - 28TH JUNE 2026 ABERDEEN, SCOTLAND

Celebrate NAFCo's 25th Anniversary with a 5-day festival of music, dance, and traditions from across the North Atlantic!

WHAT TO EXPECT:

- Academic Talks & Discussions
- Concerts & Sessions
- Family Friendly Events
- Workshops

Support the Institute

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INSTITUTE

The Institute relies on outside financial support to make many of its activities possible. To help establish closer ties between the Elphinstone Institute and communities, please consider becoming a Friend of the Institute (annual subscription is £20.00 per year). There are events organised by the Friends throughout the year.

If you would like to join the Friends of the Elphinstone Institute, volunteer, or have suggestions, please contact the Administrator, a.sharman@abdn.ac.uk

What's On

Keep up to date with all of our news and events by following us on:

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