

WER D'YE COME FAE? POETRY IN THE COMMUNITY:

OXFAM AND THE SCOTTISH POETRY LIBRARY

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Oh, land of wind
land of persistent uncompromising rain
land of castles
and the brave heart who never goes astray
grant me a fresh chance
to live
to sing
to restore my broken poem.

From *Appeal*, Iyad Hayatleh, Palestinian Poet, Glasgow.

In 2006 Oxfam and the Scottish Poetry Library (SPL) began a collaboration working with refugees and their host communities in Scotland, which are mostly communities in the socially and economically marginalised neighbourhoods of Glasgow. The Scottish Poetry Library is a Scottish cultural institution that primarily is a library and resource of poetry in Scotland that is also involved in educational outreach activities. With the recent arrival of new migrant communities in Scotland, especially communities with large numbers of people seeking asylum who started arriving in Glasgow, Scotland from 2000, the SPL was keen to work with these new members of Scotland. Oxfam had been working with the refugee community and support organisations in Glasgow for a number of years focusing on projects that positively influenced public attitudes to people seeking asylum¹. Oxfam hoped that this work would bring communities together to facilitate ‘meaningful contact’ between newly arriving people seeking asylum and residents in Glasgow in a non-threatening way through poetry as well as produce poems that could be used for a variety of different projects and have an impact on, for instance, how the individual participants as well as the public viewed their new neighbours. The initiative was an organic process that began with community poetry workshops where participants learned about poetry and in the process, about themselves and one another. Many of the poems have been published and exhibited in public

spaces. The poems have also become a resource for schools. This activity led to further workshops and collaborations with children, teachers as well as new migrants from other communities. Overall, the project gave people seeking asylum and local residents, many of whom had had little contact with people from countries like Iraq, Palestine and Zimbabwe a chance to meet and work with each other. The poets who facilitated the workshops and the organisations who ran the workshops, including the Scottish Poetry Library and schools, had the opportunity to gain experience with people seeking asylum groups and learn about the potential of poetry in educational and community-building projects that build understanding between and within communities.

In September 2007 Oxfam and the SPL organised a series of poetry workshops in Glasgow.² The workshops were designed to encourage people seeking asylum and Scots to share stories about their lives and experiences through learning about and writing poetry. The participants had to have intermediate English, a willingness to learn about poetry and work with others over a number of facilitated sessions. Especially since many of the participants had limited resources and experiences of marginalisation, organisers decided to hold the workshops in community venues that were familiar to them and also to work with local residents to recruit participants. Facilitation by both a Scottish and a refugee poet with support from community activists and Oxfam helped to make the participants feel comfortable. Two groups participated in the workshops. There were three sessions in a community hall and there was also a trip to the Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh. People learned about poetry and each other and poems were produced! In order to share some of these extraordinary

1 From 2003 Oxfam initiated and facilitated the Asylum Positive Images Project in Scotland. Building on previous work of Oxfam in partnership with other organisations brought together a network of over 20 organisations (voluntary and public) to support work that addressed negative attitudes towards people seeking asylum in Scotland. This has included work with journalists, refugee communities and ‘meaningful contact work’ including supporting arts in the community such as this project with the Scottish Poetry Library. Documented in *Forward Together: Ideas for working with asylum seekers, refugees, the media and communities* <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/ukpoverty/resources.html#asylumprog>

2 In addition to Oxfam and the SPL the poetry project received funding support from the European Social Fund, Edinburgh City of Literature and the Scottish Arts Council.

poems with the larger community, some were selected for posters on buses in Glasgow and Edinburgh in the run-up to International Human Rights Day (10 December, 2007) under the banner of 'Asylum is a Human Right'³. The bus companies in both cities gave concessionary rates to place the poems in poster-sized formats inside the buses for a month. Since short poems are easy to read quickly, people could read them on the buses with ease even on short journeys. And with the images and layout, they were designed to catch people's attention. Anecdotal feedback was very positive. The poems were also printed onto postcards so they could be easily distributed for use in schools and by other organisations and also developed into a teaching resource⁴. Palestinian poet Iyad Hayatleh and Scottish poet Gerry Cambridge facilitated the poetry workshops. Commenting on the workshops, as a facilitator, Gerry said,

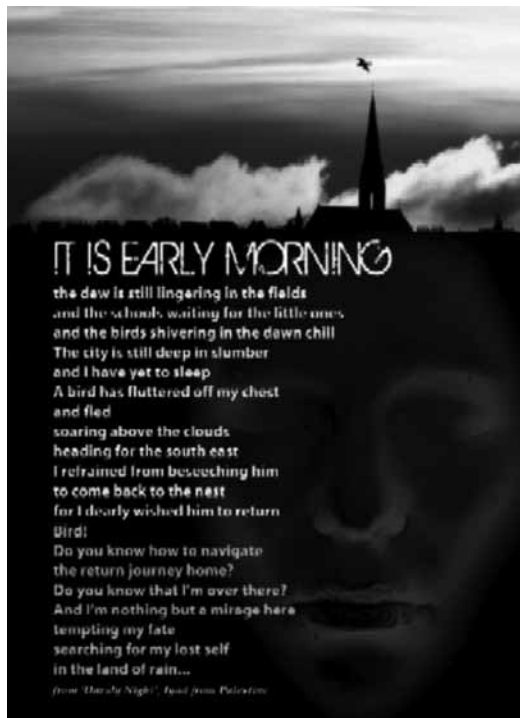
The workshops were really inspiring for me as a teacher. Seeing Scots and refugees learning from each other's experiences was wonderful. When people are introduced to each other as human beings rather than statistics, real change happens and real friendships develop.

Iyad Hayatleh is a professional poet who claimed asylum in 2000 and was sent to Glasgow. He was a volunteer with many organisations (including Artists in Exile Glasgow and Scottish PEN) while he waited seven years, unable to work, for his refugee claim to be settled. The SPL used his poem "Appeal" as a Subway Stanza during Refugee Week 2007 (see below). Gerry mentored him as co-facilitator of the workshops. He said of the poetry workshops,

I have been really surprised by the

3 Copies of all five poems and artwork for the posters that appeared on the buses in Glasgow and Edinburgh and the postcards are available through Oxfam GB or the Scottish Poetry Library.

4 SPL Teaching Resource - Wer d'ye come fae? http://www.spl.org.uk/ed_resources/wer_dye_lp.html



participants... they have been really keen to take part... and to learn about poetry. When we asked them to write something about their lives, they came back with nearly final poems that did not require much editing... We've discovered six or seven new poets through this process. And in terms of mutual understanding it has been great: it was a chance to hear about people's stories and get to understand each other better

Iyad wrote the poem during the workshops that was used as part of the bus campaign.

Sifiso a refugee from Zimbabwe was one of the participants. Sifiso was forced to leave two of her four children at home when she fled the country in 2003 [she received leave to remain in 2008] and the Home Office sent her to Glasgow to await her asylum decision. She said of the workshops,

from **Unruly Night** Iyad, from Palestine

It is early morning / the dew is still lingering in the fields / and the schools waiting for the little ones
and the birds shivering in the dawn chill / The city is still deep in slumber / and I have yet to sleep
A bird has fluttered off my chest / and fled / soaring above the clouds / heading for the south east
I refrained from beseeching him / to come back to the nest / for I dearly wished him to return

Bird!

Do you know how to navigate the return journey home? / Do you know that I'm over there?
And I'm nothing but a mirage here / tempting my fate / searching for my lost self / in the land of rain...

Asylum is a human right - Human Rights Day 10 December



Equal



Iyad's poem on a postcard.

I hadn't written a poem since I was at school – a long time ago! I wasn't sure that I'd be any good at writing, but the workshops helped and encouraged me to put my thoughts and ideas into words. I wanted my poem to express how I feel about Scotland, that's why I wrote the lines,

Scotland here I come

To my surprise, you are different from what I heard

Cold but welcoming

Carrie Docherty from Scotland has lived in Glasgow for 40 years growing up in one of the poorest parts of the city. For her, one of the greatest benefits of the workshops was making new friends and learning about others' experiences.

She also spoke about the emotional benefit of putting life experiences into a poem:

It was quite shocking when one of the participants wrote a poem saying that their family had been wiped out because they'd been shot. Maybe that person needed to do that - sometimes in just talking about it you let it out, and it makes you feel better. Maybe it'll help that person to get through that... I'd like them to bring in as many different cultures and keep groups like this running because maybe it would be a good stepping stone to pull people together a bit...A lot has

gone into them [the poems]. It's not just a poem but our experiences.

Maryam Mojab from Iran arrived in Glasgow in 1988 after being forced to leave Iran with her ex-husband for political reasons.

These workshops are not just about writing - it's more about getting people to learn about different cultures and breaking down those barriers.

Maryam's poem 'Wer d'ye come fae?' is a witty expression of life and misunderstanding. She hopes it will raise awareness about the situation of people seeking asylum.

While people's impression of asylum-seekers has moved on since I arrived, there is still a lot that can be done.

Scottish poet Ken Cockburn developed a teaching resource with the poems for Scottish schools.⁶ This resource continues to be used in schools in Scotland and Iyad and Gerry used this resource in schools in the Scottish highlands in the city of Inverness a year later to discuss and work on issues of migration and the meaning of home for the children and teachers. The teaching resource was developed to use in different ways with different groups of students to encourage discussion about migration and home and engage them in developing poetry. Iyad also worked with new migrants at the

6 SPL Teaching Resource - Wer d'ye come fae? http://www.spl.org.uk/ed_resources/wer_dye_lp.html



Asylum is a human right - Human Rights Day 10 December

By Sifiso from Zimbabwe

Welcoming Centre in Edinburgh—a social and advice centre for migrants (refugees and economic migrants) to produce poetry for a 2009 Refugee Week event at the St Andrews Poetry Garden—a public space in one of the main parks in the centre of Edinburgh.

For the participants and the facilitators as well as for Oxfam and the Scottish Poetry Library the project has been a success. It has demonstrated how collaborative projects that use poetry to reach across communities and involve a range of organisations, locals, newcomers, schools and public spaces can help develop new understandings between groups where there is mistrust and a lack of knowledge about each other's circumstances and cultures.

Without conducting a survey that tracks resulting attitudes, actions and relations, it is true that it is difficult to know the specific impact that these activities had in terms of influencing public attitudes toward people seeking asylum. But research has demonstrated that these types of activities along with other art projects working with film, photography and theatre in Glasgow over the last decade have made important contributions to more creating more inclusive public spaces and neighbourhoods and more widely, have resulted in more positive public attitudes towards asylum than the rest of the UK.⁷ In bringing people together in workshops to learn about poetry, people seeking asylum and Scottish residents met people they



Poster from the buses: *Where de'ye come fae?*, Maryam, Iran

otherwise would probably not have met. The workshops meant that they sat together in the same hall, spoke about their lives, listened to one another, each learning how to express themselves through the language of poetry with the power of its rhythm and imagery.

We all have ideas and stereotypes about people who are different from us and whom we do not know. This kind of participant-oriented project and, importantly, poetry itself can show people that they have more in common with each other than they think. Sharing about each others lives in non-threatening small groups helped people to learn about each other in ways that would not have happened and were commented on by both the refugees and the Scottish participants. The workshops, the educational projects, and sharing the poems on bus routes throughout the city were an opportunity for those of us involved in the project and also others to question the ideas we have about one another. By displaying the poems in public spaces and making them available as postcards and a teaching resource, there was an opportunity to expose a wide range of people to the experiences and perceptions and lives of people seeking asylum. The poetic form with its ability to quickly communicate powerful imagery was perfect for giving 'pause for thought' and potentially influencing attitudes in a positive way. Given the fact that asylum seekers and refugees live mostly in Glasgow and in lower income housing, the reality in Scotland is that most people will never meet a refugee or a person seeking asylum yet they will have been exposed to news media⁸ and other popular images that may not have accurately portrayed refugees or their experience in the UK. The poems show that people seeking asylum and refugees have their own individual experience of

arriving in Scotland with a range of feelings and impressions about what they undergo in their daily lives.

The poems are thought-provoking, poignant and sometimes amusing reflections on Scottish life, and beyond, bringing new and host communities together and reminding us that asylum is a basic human right and that those who have come to Scotland are people, like us, who just want a secure, stable home and to integrated into supportive communities.

7 Lewis, Miranda, *Warm Welcome: Understanding public attitudes to asylum seekers in Scotland*, Institute of Public Policy Research (ippr) <http://www.ippr.org.uk/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=474>

8 Lugo-Ocando, Jairo (2011). *Media Campaigns and Asylum Seekers in Scotland*. In Alleyne, M. (Ed.). *Anti-Racism & Multi-culturalism: studies in International Communication*. (pp.95-128) New Jersey: Transaction Press.